Owari no Chronicle Volume5

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AHEADシリーズ

お終わりのクロニクル③〈上〉

初夏の夜、奥多摩の街外れに突然現れた概念空間で、一つの戦闘が行われた。それはかつて3rd-Gが生み出した人型機械「武神」同士によるものだった。

3rd-Gは、神々の力を持つ人々が創り上げた自動人形と武神と呼ばれるロボットの世界。そして、60年前の大戦時のある出来事により二つの穢れを持つという。

佐山たちは、この3rd-Gを次の全竜交渉の相手に選ぶが、この穢れにより全Gを敵に回す危険性を抱え込むことに……。

果たして、3rd-Gが持つ二つの穢れとは何か？　2体の武神の闘いの意味は？　佐山たちは過去の遺恨を取り除き、無事交渉を成功させることができるのか？

「AHEADシリーズ」第3話スタート！

か-5-20

AHEADシリーズ
終わりのクロニクル③〈上〉

川上稔

電撃文庫
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The 1st.AHEAD

かわかみ　みのる
川上　稔

1975年1月3日生まれ、東京出身。突発的にプラモ作りに出戻ったが、塗装の奥深さに思わずハマり込む。原稿を書きながら夜な夜なエアブラシ片手に妖しげな行為を繰り返しているらしい。「電撃hp」では第3のシリーズとなる「OBSTACLE」の連載も開始。

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AHEADシリーズ
終わりのクロニクル①〈上〉〈下〉
終わりのクロニクル②〈上〉〈下〉
終わりのクロニクル③〈上〉

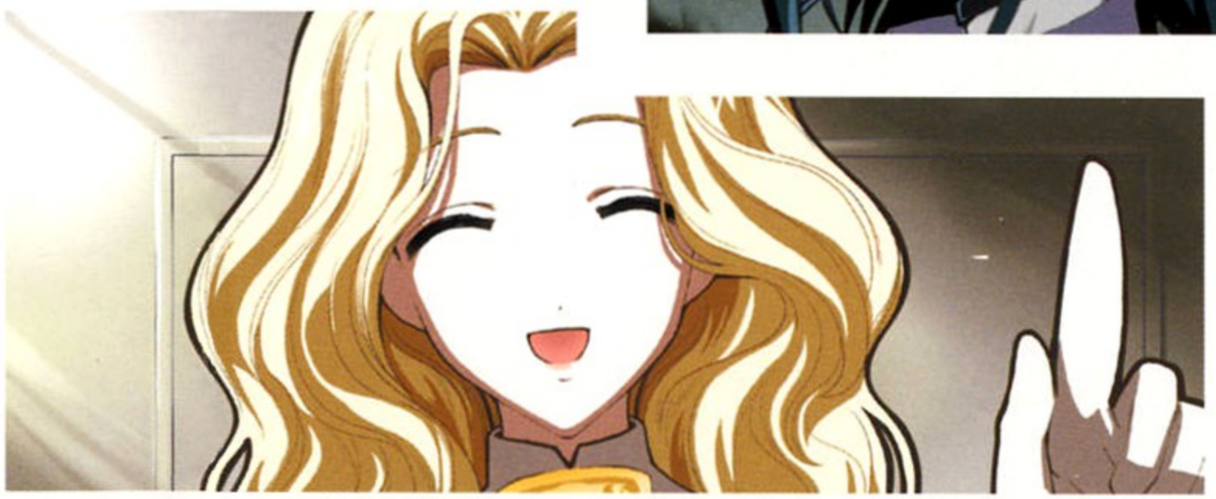
イラスト：さとやす（TENKY）

山形生まれの栃木育ち。「最近、実家で生まれて初めて犬に触れました。いいもんだなあ。ドップリ浸かりそう」猫の次は犬ですかー。

カバー／旭印刷

The Ending Chronicle

Act.03



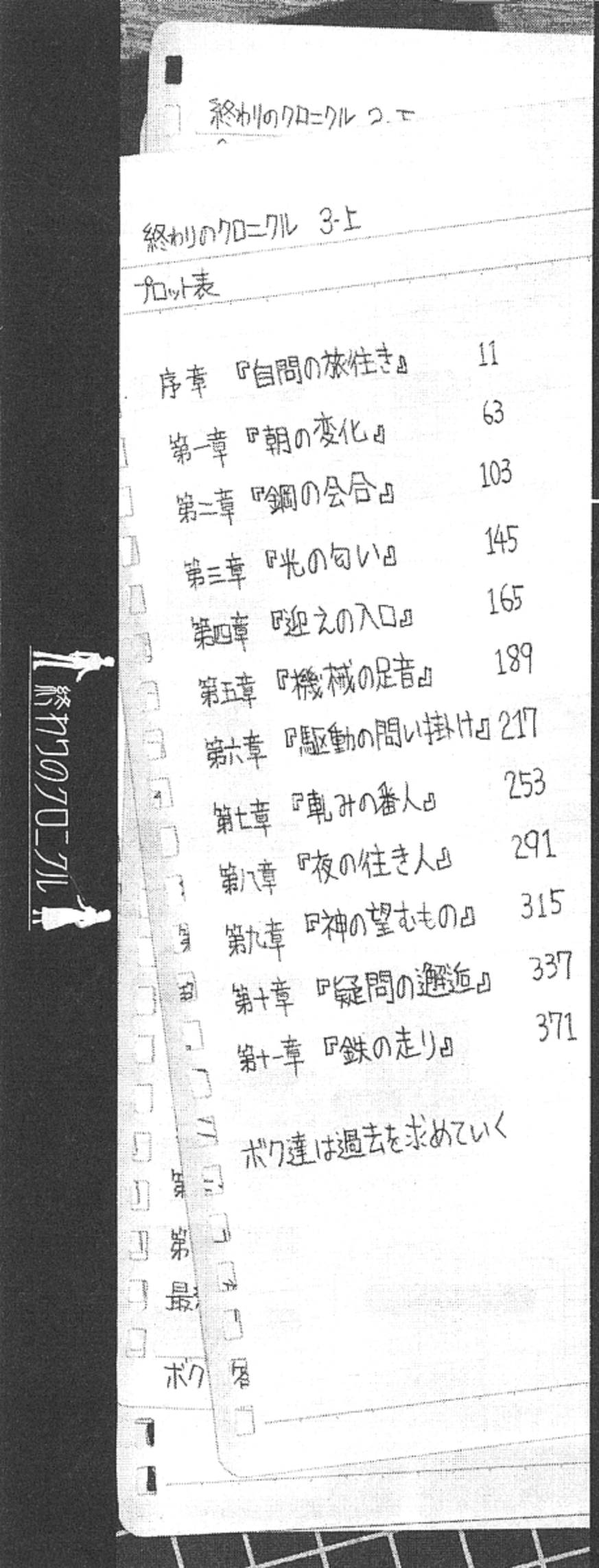


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イラスト:さとやす(TENKY)
カバーデザイン:渡辺宏一(2725inc)
本文デザイン:TENKY

03

・現状における佐山中心人物相関図・

家族関係

田宮家
実家代わり

佐山の両親
既に他界

元護国課

?
佐山・薫
養父

ジークフリート
図書館司書

アブラム
実働部部長

大城・宏昌
技術者

学校関係

大樹先生
担当・顧問

生徒会関係

出雲・覚
会長

風見・千里
会計

佐山・御言

UCAT関係

ディアナ
独逸UCAT

新庄・運／切
不断の存在

大城・　夫
困った老人

大城・至
監督

Sf
至の侍女

シビュレ
整備役

ボルトマン
連携役

2nd-G

鹿島・昭緒
2nd-Gの軍神

月読・史弦
開発部部長

1st-G

ブレンヒルト
美術部部長

Characters

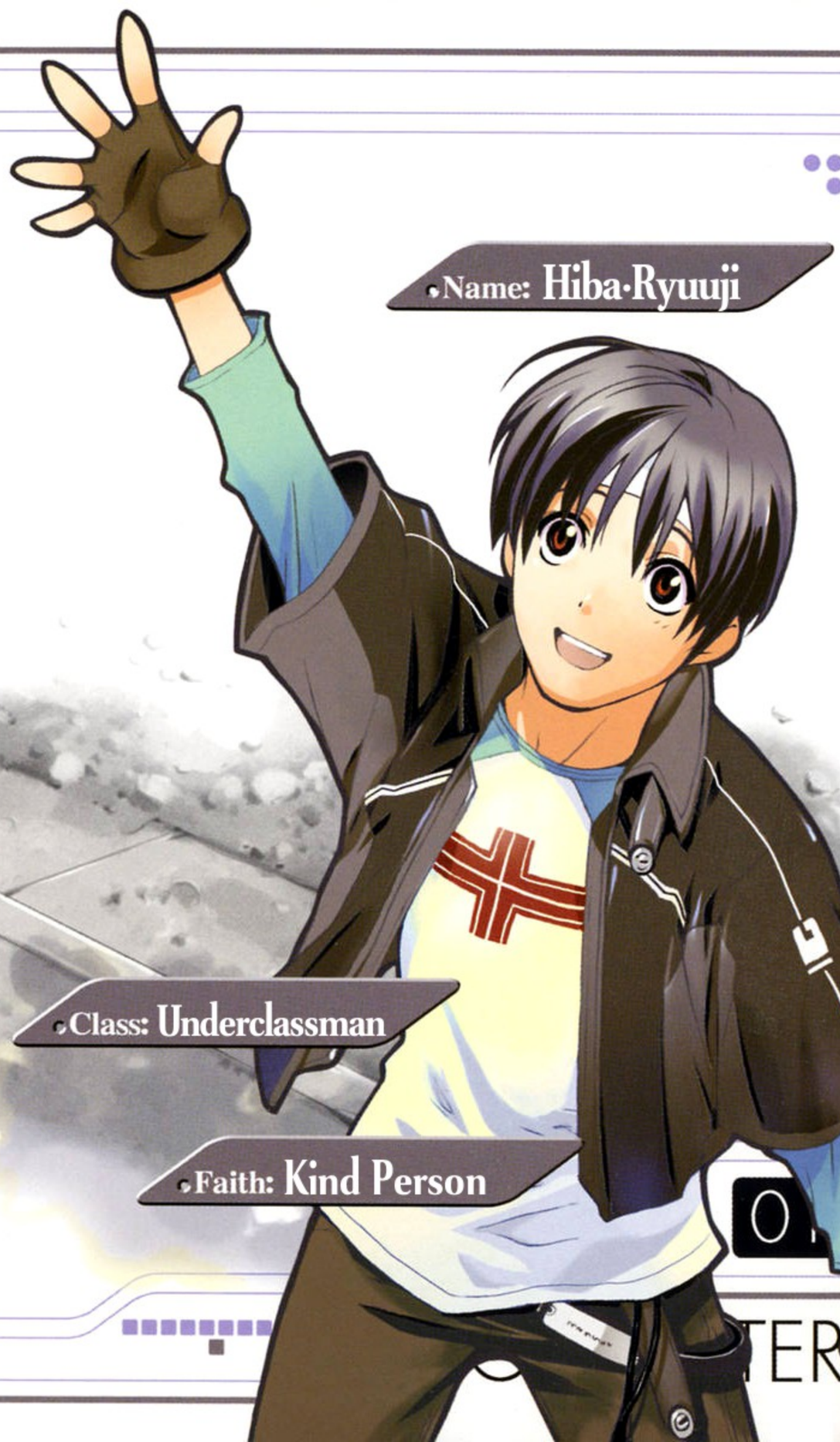
CHARACTER

02

Name: Mikage

Class: Normal Person???

Faith: Hiba's Partner



Name: Hiba·Ryuuji

Class: Underclassman

Faith: Kind Person

Name: Hiba Ryuuji

Class: Underclassman

Faith: Kind Person

Name: Mikage

Class: Normal Person???

Faith: Hiba's Partner

G-World

04

Name: Baku

There are stars outside the atmosphere and empty space lies beyond them.

Main floating continent

Atmosphere surrounding the land

Floating land

3rd-Gear is a collection of giant floating continents.
The people who live there live for thousands of years and each individual controls the world's concepts and has some level of control over the weather and time as well.
When they die, a device known as the Tartaros Machina sends their concept and will to the Concept Core.
The concept stored in the Concept Core is extracted and inherited when a new life is born, but the formless will remains in the Concept Core as it is difficult to individually extract.
For that reason, the Concept Core acts as a world of the dead from which one cannot escape once one enters it.

·About 3rd-Gear·

This Gear possesses metal and light gravitational control concepts.
Metal possesses life, its weight and hardness is altered, and it is moved with gravitational control.
3rd-Gear used that power to create large gods of war and a great number of automatons.
At the time of the Concept War, they used their power in an attempt to dominate the other Gears.

Name: Sibyl

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Diagram:

Top: There are stars outside the atmosphere and empty space lies beyond them.

Middle: Main floating continent

Bottom left: Atmosphere surrounding the land

Bottom right: Floating land

3rd-Gear is a collection of giant floating continents.

The people who live there live for thousands of years and each individual controls the world's concepts and has some level of control over the weather and time as well.

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Name: Sibyl

Name: Baku

Pamphlet

Issued by: Pamphlet Team of Japanese UCAT General Affairs Training Camp Unit – July 10, 2005

TIME FOR THE (MANDATORY) SUMMER TRAINING CAMP
SETO INLAND SEA EDITION

Background added digitally

Fisherman – Age 40
Tabuchi Kenji-san

We asked a local about the island.
"It scares me. No sane person would ever approach that island. Everyone in the village calls it the wonderfully mysterious island."
Sounds exciting, doesn't it?

To all of you Japanese UCAT members who are constantly fighting for the sake of the world, how has your early summer been?
As opposed to last year's Mt. Osore medium tour or the year before that's Russian border nuclear submarine salvage tour, this year we are going to a normal sea.
The Seto Inland Sea. Sounds good, doesn't it?
A deserted island. Sounds good, doesn't it?
Only one ship a day. Sounds good, doesn't it?
The surrounding sea is filled with whirlpools and sharks. Sounds good, doesn't it?
You can't escape. Sounds good, doesn't it?
The events to look forward to are as follows:

- A bald instructor who strikes the depraved.
- A yakiniku festival with a random chance of any kind of meat from any country.
- Training in escaping giant fireworks fired at the ground.

Have fun and try to survive.

ANOTHER YEAR
ANOTHER FUN, FUN (MAKE SURE TO SAY IT TWICE)
JAPANESE UCAT SUMMER TRAINING CAMP!

Model:Chisato Kazami:sinjo(ver.Sa):Ken2 Tabuchi

Top: Issued by: Pamphlet Team of Japanese UCAT General Affairs Training Camp Unit – July 10, 2005

Yellow Text: Time for the (mandatory) summer training camp

Blue text: Seto Inland Sea Edition

Over Shinjou's stomach: Background added digitally

Red text: Another year, another fun, fun (make sure to say it twice) Japanese UCAT summer training camp!

Right box:

To all of you Japanese UCAT members who are constantly fighting for the sake of the world, how has your early summer been?

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*Training in escaping giant fireworks fired at the ground.

Have fun and try to survive.

Left box:

Fisherman – Age 40

Tabuchi Kenji-san

We asked a local about the island.

"It scares me. No sane person would ever approach that island. Everyone in the village calls it the wonderfully mysterious island."

Sounds exciting, doesn't it?

Title Page

終わりのクロニクル

著●川上 稔　イラスト●さとやす（TENKY）

3
【上】

—Everyone,
Prepare yourselves,
For what it means to accept it.

Everyone,

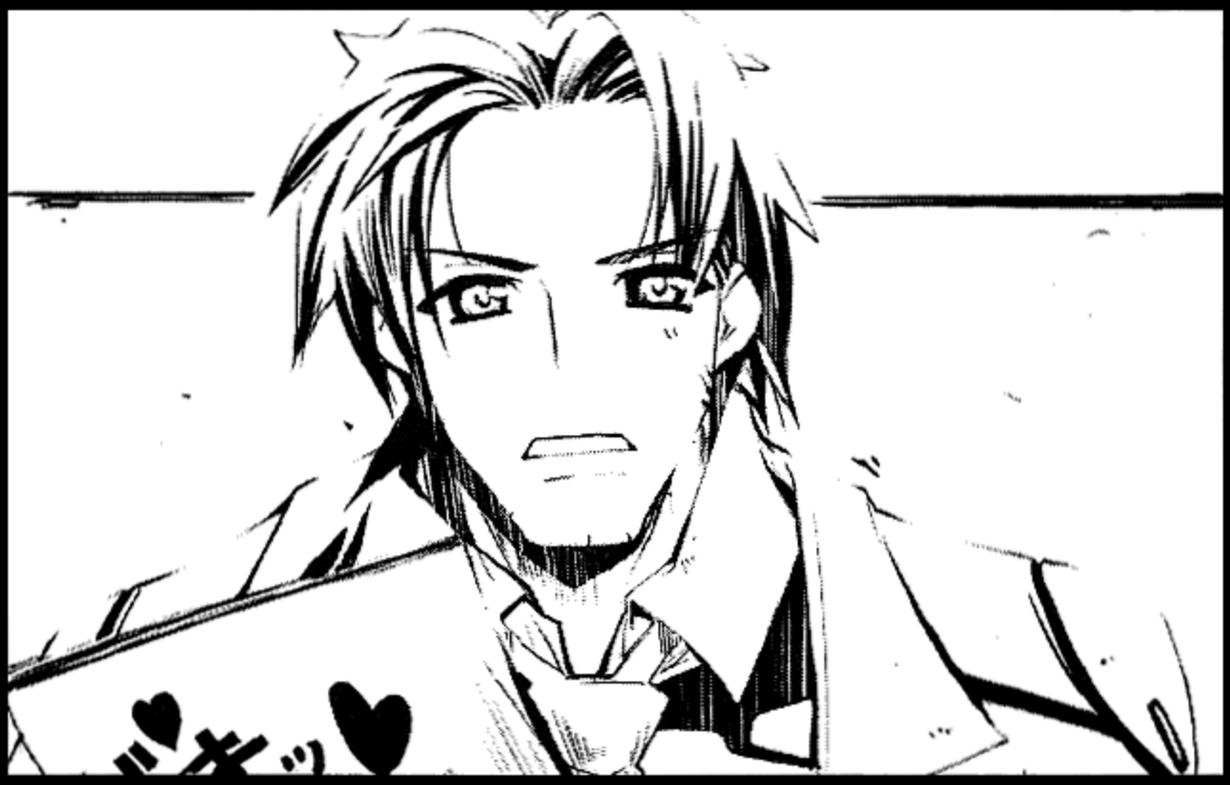
Prepare yourselves

For what it means to accept it

Prologue: On a Trip of Self-Questioning

Prologue

“On a Trip of Self-Questioning”



What exactly is a question?
Do you go and continue on?
Or do you go and come back?

What exactly is a question?

Do you go and continue on?

Or do you go and come back?

Two automatic doors led to a large white airtight space . The fifty square meter white walls, floor, and ceiling were all covered with light emitting panels.

The placard at the entrance illuminated by that light was printed with the name of the space: Training Room 9 .

Four people sat in the center of the training room. They were taking a break after completing their training. They all wore white and black armored uniforms and they were looking at small handmade documents.

The first one to speak was the well-built young man in the center. He held up the document in his hand as he did.

"Anyway, we have three days until Team Leviathan's summer training camp known as the 'we have less than five months until the world grows too negative and is destroyed, so let's go to the beach and hope someone's top falls off' training camp, but… What is it, Sayama you idiot?"

Before he could say anymore, the boy who had raised his hand spoke.

"Izumo, while the name of the camp is surprisingly good, I must ask…"

"I know, I know. You want to know about the next Leviathan Road, right?"

Sayama nodded and turned to the long-haired girl sitting to his left.

"We need to take action soon, but that will likely make us quite busy. Did you have any plans for summer break, Shinjou-kun?"

"Hm. I want to beat some of the new games I got, but I guess the Leviathan Road is more important." Shinjou smiled bitterly and turned to the other two people. " Kazami-san, what about you two?"

"No, I don't think we have anything," answered the girl directly across from her. She brushed up her short hair as she continued. "But do you know where 3rd-Gear is, Sayama? I hear we still have a few of the 3rd-Gear automatons that fell into our possession when 3rd was destroyed, but I've never heard anything about the location of the other 3rd-Gear remnants."

"The other day, the old man gave me a hint concerning that. He mentioned a large-scale string vibration abnormality in the Kurashiki region about five years ago. "

"Kurashiki? You mean…?"

Shinjou looked up at the ceiling in thought and Kazami immediately spoke up.

"That's in Okayama. It's the Kojima Peninsula. According to the Divine States-World Interaction Theory, that's Greece. So are they there?"

"No. It seems the Okayama branch immediately investigated but was unable to detect 3rd-Gear's presence. But we might find some sort of hint if we go there. And before that, I would like to meet the automatons kept in UCAT custody."

"I see," muttered Shinjou.

…3rd-Gear.

That Gear became the basis of Greek mythology and had created automatons and the giant humanoid weapons known as gods of war.

"The Concept Core was split in two and one half is held by Typhon, right?"

"Yes, and Typhon is most likely a god of war." Izumo scratched his head as he continued. "But we don't know where the other half is. And with 3rd-Gear, we'll probably be up against gods of war, so the Leviathan Road is probably gonna be tricky."

Shinjou nodded.

Thanks to the concept activation ten years prior, UCAT was able to stabilize the operation of automatons and gods of war. Before that, they had only been able to construct an unstable concept space for humanoid machines, so their development of automatons and gods of war had been mostly guesswork.

"I wonder if 3rd-Gear's remnants are living in this world with Typhon."

"If they were not caught in 3rd's destruction, they must be. There probably are not very many of them, though."

"Why do you say that?"

"Merely a guess. They have yet to do anything at all, so the odds are high they have few usable personnel. That is all."

Hearing Sayama's words, Shinjou tilted her head. She had a certain thought.

"Then," she began. "Why are they hiding? If they really don't have many people like you say, they could always surrender. If they don't, they have to act."

"The answer is simple: they have something to feel guilty about. If they show themselves, whoever finds them might take some form of revenge. They may have that sort of reason for their reluctance to make an appearance."

As he spoke, Sayama looked at Shinjou, Izumo, and finally Kazami.

"We should be careful. 3rd-Gear's Leviathan Road will not be resolved so simply."

"When have we ever resolved something simply? Maybe if we didn't have a certain idiot complicating things."

Izumo's comment caused Sayama to nod deeply, fold his arms, and give a serious expression.

"Yes, you are very right. But you should not refer to yourself as an idiot. Let me say it for you: you are a damn idiot. How was that? Will that make a sufficient replacement for your self deprecation?"

Izumo ignored him and glared at Kazami in annoyance.

"I want to get this conversation back on track. Can you force it in that direction?"

"Sure. I'm good at forcing things. …Anyway, let's move from the Leviathan Road to the training camp. Shinjou, did you see where we're going?"

"Eh? No. The location is chosen randomly every year and the thought of the Mt. Osore medium tour for last year really got me down, so I don't check it until the day we have to leave. That way I can resign myself to it the instant I see it."

"Perfect. And I'm sure Sayama is the same."

Kazami showed off the pamphlet in her hand with a smile. She narrowed her eyes and laughed.

"Heh heh. We're going to the Seto Inland Sea. Specifically, a deserted island owned by IAI. It's officially a test site, but it's actually a UCAT training ground. And …that area feels like it's related to 3rd. Right, Sayama?"

Sayama did not immediately react, but after a short pause, he cleared his throat and spoke disappointedly.

"It sounds like a nice place."

His casual tone caused Shinjou to smile bitterly in her heart.

…He's actually really happy.

"We might be able to do some preliminary investigation of 3rd-Gear, Sayama-kun."

"Perhaps so, Shinjou-kun. But… Kazami, how will the tents be arranged?"

"Unfortunately for you two, you will be separate. There will be a boys tent and a girls tent."

"I-I don't particularly see that as unfortunate," said Shinjou.

"I certainly do. And on top of that, there is a problem with that arrangement." Sayama nodded quietly. "If we are separate, I will be unable to continue my standard inspection of Shinjou-kun's bod-…"

"Waaaah!!"

Shinjou frantically tightened Sayama's tie. With her eyebrows raised, she lightly shook him back and forth.

"Stop saying that in front of people. Your morals may be set to a foreign level or even an animal level, b-but I want to treat that kind of thing with more-… Are you listening?"

"Shinjou, I'll answer for that idiot: he can't breathe."

She looked past the tightened tie and saw a happy and nonresistant look on his face.

"Wah!"

Shinjou supported him as he limply collapsed.

…Oh, no. I went too far. Oh, well.

Izumo watched as Baku mimicked Sayama's collapse from atop his head.

"Okay, let's leave that idiot be and leave for the day. I've gotten hooked on winning prizes at the batting center upstairs. They have a bunch of great prizes and Chisato loves them."

"But, Kaku, stop making a fool of yourself by winning a prize you already have. …Oh, and I guess it would be dangerous to abandon Sayama here. Whoever is using the place next would be worried. Right, Shinjou?"

"Um, yes… I suppose the others do view him like that. "

Shinjou took a breath, but Sayama still appeared to be sleeping. After some hesitation, she placed his head on her stocking-covered lap.

She grabbed Baku from his head, placed the creature on her shoulder, and faced forward.

"Kazami-san, why do you look so impressed?"

"I was just surprised you do that without being asked. " While sitting to Izumo's left, Kazami slapped her own lap. "Resting him on your lap, I mean."

"Yeah…"

Shinjou nodded and looked to the white staff engraved with Ex-St which lay to her side. She recalled the first time she had done this several months before…no, only about three months before.

"Sayama-kun wanted to do this the first time we met. And he asked me the other night as well. I think he sometimes wants to depend on someone like this."

"The other night?"

"Yeah, I played cards with him and lost horribly. And then…um…"

He had asked for a lot more than just to rest on her lap, but she was naturally hesitant to mention any of it.

She frantically formed a smile as she decided to change the subject.

"S-Sayama-kun said his grandfather taught him how to play cards. He's really good. I can only ever win at video games. In the new fighting game 'Virtua Leader 2', I can use the American representative to get in some good air combos."

"Chisato. I think she's trying to hide something."

"Yeah, I sense it too."

"I-I'm not hiding anything. I'm not."

She waved her hands in denial, but Kazami gradually gained a bitter smile.

She shrugged dismissively and looked Shinjou in the eye.

"Well, whatever. But not letting himself do this unless he beats you at cards sounds like him."

"Yeah." Shinjou smiled bitterly as well and lightly brushed up Sayama's bangs as he lay unmoving on her lap. "I'm willing to do this whenever he wants, but he seems to have trouble with it."

"I see. That's nice. …By the way, Chisato, sometimes I want-…"

"A fist to the face? That's perfectly fine. Do you want the right? The left? Or maybe both?"

Shinjou looked around the training room while ignoring Izumo who was pretending to cry while collapsed to the side. She saw that they were the only ones there.

"Where are Sibyl-san and the others?"

"Sibyl left with Ooshiro-san. They apparently had someone to meet."

"I see." Shinjou nodded and looked down at the training camp pamphlet in her hand. She then looked at Sayama's face as he breathed shallowly on her lap. "By the way, Sayama-kun has been a bit irritated lately because the Leviathan Road has been progressing so slowly."

"In the two months since the negotiation with 2nd-Gear, our only orders have been to train and we haven't tried to contact any other Gears. And now we have to go on a training camp? It must be horrible for someone as impatient as him."

"But holding the camp near land related to 3rd has to be Old Man Ooshiro's doing," said Izumo. He sat up, folded his arms, and looked toward Sayama. "It is true

the other countries' UCATs complained about our actions after we dealt with Yamata. They said kids shouldn't be sent into such danger without training. American UCAT was especially annoying."

"The Divine States-World Interaction Theory associates America with 5th-Gear, right? Something likely happened between them in the past. American UCAT may not want us taking the initiative in the negotiations and advancing to negotiations with 5th. They'll probably interfere with that Leviathan Road."

"The world is a real pain."

"Oh? Quit acing like you understand. The problem isn't the world; it's the pride of the people living in it. …I have my own pride and I'm sure Shinjou does too."

Shinjou thought when she heard that. She had a feeling she did indeed, but she also wondered what exactly she had inside her.

As she focused on that thought, her gaze dropped and the boy sleeping on her lap entered her vision. She brushed up his hair with her right hand which had a ring on it. That was when she naturally found her answer.

"Yes. I think I probably do too."

She nodded and Kazami smiled.

"Sayama must as well. And it's his understanding of that that irritates him so much. He also has his grandfather to pursue, so he must want to begin the Leviathan Road with the next Gear right away."

Shinjou nodded and remembered something.

"The training camp and the Leviathan Road are important, but we also have to worry about summer homework. We have a lot."

"That's a rather carefree concern when the world might be destroyed."

"I know what you mean, but Ooki-sensei used the wrong book for our first term classes. We found out the day before yesterday and Sayama-kun set up an inquiry commission, but the only result was 'Oh, no! I'm so sorry !' …Our school is a surprisingly careless organization."

"Heh heh heh. Don't worry, Shinjou. The way I see it, it's a surprisingly thrilling organization. …And I forgot this was your first time for this. That means it will be

your only time. Third years get no homework because we have entrance exams to worry about."

Hearing that, Shinjou suddenly raised her head. On the other hand, Kazami and Izumo remained relaxed.

"Why do you look so interested, Shinjou?"

"I just had a thought: what will we do once you two graduate?"

"Needless to say, Chisato and I will- gah! I didn't even finish the setup!"

"Shut up," muttered Kazami while ignoring Izumo as he once again lay to the side and pretended to cry. "I plan to go on to university, but we're doing the Leviathan Road, right? So once I graduate high school, I might try studying abroad at different universities. Who knows what will have happened to the world at that point, but the different UCATs should be busy. I was thinking of helping them out a bit. Oh, and Kaku would be with me."

Shinjou was unsure what to say.

"You've thought that through… Surprisingly."

"That's not exactly a compliment."

"S-sorry. But…um…how should I put it?"

"Saying anything more would just dig yourself deeper, so stop. And this is normal. Next year, you'll be thinking about it too. In your third year, there's no one above you and simply flipping through the calendar gets you thinking. You think about it even when staring out the classroom window."

After saying that, a sudden look of realization came over Kazami and her eyebrows rose slightly while she tried to retain her smile.

"I've practically been lecturing you while soaking in self-satisfaction, haven't I? Well, you can let me act like an upperclassman every once in a while, right? I can't say this kind of thing in front of Sayama."

"True. Sayama-kun worries about people a surprising amount, so he would probably be overly considerate."

Shinjou lowered her gaze toward Sayama.

He lay motionlessly on her lap. She did nothing but stare at him, but it still put a smile on her face.

Seeing them, Kazami let out an exasperated sigh.

Izumo remained in his position collapsed next to her.

How quiet, thought Shinjou.

But then a noise filled the training room.

"An alarm?"

Kazami stood up as the repeating high-pitched noise stabbed through the air.

Next, an announcement filled the room.

"Um, this is an official announcement. Currently, um, two huge philosopher's stone readings are flying in from the left side of Japan. So, um, the special division and the …standard division? Both are to send all personnel in training or on standby to the main entrance."

Hearing Ooki's voice, Shinjou frantically looked at Sayama. His eyes remained closed, so she spoke.

"Sayama-kun! Sayama-kun! Wake up! Wake up! Ooki-sensei is saying something strange!"

But his eyes did not open. Shinjou panicked, thought for a moment, and then whispered in his ear.

"I'm on my way to the bath."

"Wait for me!"

He jumped to his feet with his arm held out as if holding a wash basin under it.

The moon-filled night sky was colored a dark blue.

The sky, the air, and the shadows created by the moonlight were all dark blue and they all seemed to blend into each other.

And below all that dark blue, a forested mountains and valleys were visible.

The area was filled with the murmuring of the rivers flowing through the valleys and the sounds of forest insects.

The river noises seemed to continue without end.

But the insect noises were different. In some parts of the mountains, the insect cries would cease.

That silence of the insects was not contained to a single place. The silence climbed the unlit road leading up and into the mountain.

Two figures were visible on that silent mountain road.

One of the people treading on fallen branches was an old man in a lab coat.

“Sibyl-kun, how should I put this? Can we rest for a moment?”

As he gasped for breath, a blonde girl wearing a white summer coat turned toward him.

Sibyl’s blue eyes bent in a smile.

“I apologize, Ooshiro-sama. It has been so long that I began to hurry without realizing it.”

“And are we going to rest?”

"Testament. No, we are not."

As she smiled, Ooshiro looked up into the sky and continued to walk. He stared beyond the overhead leaves and branches.

"I get the feeling that everyone has my priority level set very low of late…"

"Testament. Do not worry. If everyone has it set low, it means you do not have to worry about people treating you differently."

"Wah! Are people abusing the elderly with sophistry these days!?"

His shout was followed by bird cries from the branches overhead. The panicked cries were followed by a few sounds of flapping wings and Sibyl coming to a stop.

Ooshiro stopped as well and she looked at him with her smile gone.

He waited for the bird cries and flapping to end before speaking.

"Sorry."

He bowed and Sibyl had vanished by the time he raised his head again.

"Ah! Being ignored is the worst of all!"

He began to run, but the mountain road ended before long and the forest opened up.

"The old Hiba Dojo."

With that comment, he arrived below the moonlight.

The space was twenty meters square and the ground had been packed down by countless feet.

But while the ground was hard, it was also unmaintained. Cracks had formed in places and grass was growing up from them.

This was the old Hiba Dojo.

"The Hiba family used this outdoor dojo until the end of the war."

As he looked across the unmaintained dojo, he saw two people on the northern end.

The first was Sibyl in her white summer coat. The other wore a white T-shirt and shorts.

“Hiba-sensei.”

“Oh? Ooshiro’s kid is here too?”

Hiba Ryuutetsu raised a hand in the moonlight and faced Ooshiro.

As he smiled, his red left eye reflected the moonlight.

“Why did you call me to this location of the past on this early summer night?”

“It is beginning again, Ryuutetsu-sama.”

“ ‘It’ being the cleanup of that conclusion?”

Sibyl turned toward Ryuutetsu’s voice as she bathed in the moonlight.

A train could be heard in the distance and the moon illuminated a slight smile on her face.

“That is correct. We will be purifying the vestiges of that battle over the search for a human form,” she said. “ That is why we have called you, warrant officer of the former National Defense Department and bearer of the power that destroyed 3rd-Gear.”

In the moonlight, Ooshiro pulled a pile of documents from his lab coat’s pocket.

When he handed the clip-bound pile to Ryuutetsu, Ryuutetsu’s expression grew serious.

“If you look that stern, it makes me want to make a joke.”

“Go right ahead. But it’ll cost you an arm if it isn’t funny. That’s the rule.”

Hearing that, Ooshiro froze in place and Sibyl smiled at him.

"Ooshiro-sama? There is no need to force yourself."

"That really pisses me off! I'm definitely going to say something funny now!"

"Better not, boy. Not even five arms would be enough for you."

Being called 'boy' made Ooshiro smile bitterly. He scratched at his head while unsure how to respond.

"That really takes me back."

"I'm sure not many people call you that anymore, but I remember when you were born. Hiromasa was so happy. I was…24 and Hiromasa was 37, I think."

Ryuutetsu flipped through the documents he had been given. He just looked like a little old man in the moonlight.

However…

"You look good for someone turning 85 this year."

"I haven't had a longevity treatment like Chao or Siegfried and I'm not near all sorts of concepts in combat

like Abram, so the years are really starting to catch up to me. Fortunately, my wife is the same age," he said. "But I think Thunderson or I will be the first of that group to die."

His words caused Sibyl to close her eyes next to him.

She thought closing her eyes had hidden her expression, but Ryuutetsu said nothing to her. He continued flipping through the documents before speaking again.

"Are you going to retrieve you-know-what in UCAT's Kanda laboratory tomorrow?"

"Yes. It was repaired in the Kanda lab, so we'll be picking it up tomorrow. Would you like to come along?"

"Not after all this time. I only brought it back because I couldn't bear to throw it out. And that's Kaoru's jurisdiction anyway." He looked up. "But remember. I'm giving it to you, but in exchange…"

"Yes. UCAT will not interfere with your grandson's actions."

"Heh. When did you get so obedient? What happened to the ten-year-old Peeping Tom who would peep on the women's bath with me?"

"Oh, c'mon." Ooshiro scratched at his head, but suddenly turned to Sibyl. "S-Sibyl-kun? Why are you silently taking notes?"

"Testament. I think Chisato-sama will find this information useful."

"Wh-what information! And why!?"

Sibyl ignored him. She continued to ignore him as he sadly sat on the ground with his arms around his knees.

"Anyway, Ryuutetsu-sama," she said. "Japanese UCAT wishes for a mutually beneficial deal. In exchange for the object we will retrieve tomorrow…"

"You will temporarily put 3rd-Gear's Leviathan Road on hold. Officially, at least."

Ryuutetsu's comment brought silence.

A silent wind blew through and Ryuutetsu's voice filled the air once more as that wind shook the mountain's trees.

"3rd-Gear has an impurity, so their Leviathan Road should not be carried out. The survivors from that time in the other UCATs told you the same thing, didn't they? If we accept 3rd-Gear to our side, something best avoided would occur."

"What is this impurity?"

"There are actually two. The first is the official one and the other one is more personal. The latter should only be known by me and the survivors of 3rd-Gear, so the other UCATs would be talking about the former. But both will be cleansed before long. 3rd-Gear is approaching a second destruction."

"You mean…?"

"I will tell you about that now. I will tell you what 3rd-Gear is most likely doing right now and what we are doing. Once you hear that, you will be forced to think about the Leviathan Road with 3rd-Gear as an adult." The corner of Ryuutetsu's mouth rose in a smile. "I

wonder what will happen. Once the adults learn of these impurities, they will certainly move to stop the Leviathan Road with 3rd-Gear. But what will Mikoto and his friends do?"

"Testament." Sibyl looked somewhat disappointed, but she still gave a small smile. "Sayama-sama and the others generally have a certain extent of free reign over the Leviathan Road. If they come into contact with your grandson while learning of the past on their own and working to clear that barrier…"

"Will that change where those inexperienced children are headed?"

"Testament." Sibyl nodded, but she was truly smiling now. "I think it will change where you are headed as well. They may be inexperienced, but… Chisato-sama said she was wondering what they would do once the Leviathan Road ended."

She continued smiling.

"They have already started forward along with the entire world. And they have done so whether you wish for it or not."

"Heh heh. I hate how sharp you are with things like this. …I really have gotten old. I've started worrying about sending kids to dangerous places."

Suddenly, Ryuutetsu brought a hand to his face.

"…"

He brought it to his crimson left eye.

His action brought tension to Sibyl's face and Ooshiro turned around.

"It can't be…"

"It is. That idiot really is drawing the battle this way."

"What idiot?"

"Take a guess," said Ryuutetsu. His eyebrows were raised, but he had a smile on his lips. "The one I have allowed to cleanse the impurities!"

Below the moon, the lights of a train travelled east.

The train was on its way to Okutama on the Oume Line. It was leaving Ikusabata Station near Oume and it was travelling east along the Tama River.

The light could be seen leaving from a paddy field on the southern side of the river.

The area had no external lights and the green heads of rice were illuminated by the moonlight. The sounds of the insects in the grass and the frogs in the paddy field filled the area.

The wind shaking the rice plants travelled down from the mountains and across the river, so it was fairly chilly.

The moonlit breeze crossed the paddy field and travelled downstream as if pursuing the train.

But that wind suddenly danced about.

A single figure stood on the gravel farm road travelling down the center of the paddy field.

This young woman had her back to the distant station lights.

The beige suit coat hanging over her left shoulder was worn out and faint disorder could be heard in the sound of her pumps treading on the gravel road. She lightly swung around the bag in her right hand.

"Ahh…"

She let out a weary voice and brushed up her hair with her left hand.

Below her semi-long bangs was a face with flushed cheeks. But that face was accompanied by the smell of alcohol on her breath and eyebrows brought together in a troubled look.

The motion of brushing up her hair caused her suit coat to fall from her left shoulder.

She paused for just a second and looked down at the coat on the gravel road.

She then sat down on top of the dropped coat and started to cross her legs.

"…"

But the hem of her tight skirt was too narrow, so she kept her right knee raised. With a click of the tongue, she opened her bag. She pulled out a single sheet of paper: her resume.

The name field said Tsukuyomi Miyako.

The young woman named Miyako held the resume in both hands and held it forward in the proper reading position. She let out a nauseous groan before looking at the writing with a blank look in her eyes.

“What am I supposed to do? Mom’s gonna let me have it when she hears I couldn’t say anything at the interview .”

She suddenly glanced to the right which was the west. In the dark mountains of Okutama, she could see a few small gatherings of light.

“She’s always saying she’ll introduce me to IAI, but I’ m not gonna use connections to get a job.”

Still sitting, Miyako brushed up her hair with her right hand and turned back to the resume.

The paper clearly described all the results she had produced so far: middle school, high school, university, the clubs she had belonged to, and whether she had a license.

"But…"

She let go with her right hand and searched through the bag. She pulled out a cigarette and lit it.

She brought the flavorful smoke into her mouth, savored it, and breathed it out in a ball.

"That isn't what I want them to see…"

She turned toward the fields for hobbies and special skills. Cooking and engineering were written there in ballpoint pen.

This just isn't working out, she thought as she looked at it.

"I hate relying on people, but now it's past mid-July and I still don't have a job."

She folded the resume in two and then folded it in half again.

She stuck it in her bag and sighed. With the cigarette still in her mouth, she collapsed backwards onto the ground.

She thought it was pathetic, but she grabbed the cigarette and held it up toward the moon.

“Even a former delinquent like me wants to flee this cruel world.”

She smiled bitterly, flicked the cigarette to knock off the ashes, and watched them scatter in the wind.

“Can’t something good happen for once? Like a meteor destroying society or a wealthy Prince Charming proposing, dying right after the marriage, and leaving me an easy life with tons of maids to do everything for me.” She showed her teeth in a smile. “Ridiculous.”

Her smiling face slowly grew serious.

“I just want to be a proper adult.”

As soon as she muttered that, she heard a voice.

She heard it in her mind rather than her ears and it resembled her own voice.

—Minerals have life.

"…What?"

Wondering what that voice had been, she got up.

She started to ask "who's there", but never finished.

Something fell to the ground directly to her right.

"!?"

It was a giant mass of wind. As she was almost blown away by the great roar and wind, she looked up.

"That's no meteor…"

The moonlight illuminated a white giant.

A giant white figure stood in the moonlit paddy field.

The white armored warrior was over ten meters tall.

As she sat at its feet, Miyako realized this white oddity was not disappearing, so she slowly looked around the area.

Once the wind produced by the giant vanished, everything grew still.

All the movements, insect noises, and frog croaks had vanished.

The silence and stillness was so great that a sense of confusion fell over her. It was as if all life had vanished from the area. And the giant standing next to her was more than just confusing.

She called all of her engineering skills and knowledge into her inebriated mind and stood up.

“This isn’t an anime, so how sturdy does that thing have to be to stand like that?”

The unmoving white giant was close enough to reach out and touch. And so she took a step closer to do exactly that.

As she did, two lights appeared on the giant's head.

They formed the eyes on what appeared to be its face. The lights were yellow and she felt a certain warmth in them.

They may have been a signal that something was activating.

…I feel like I've seen those eyes before. But where? No, I've never seen glowing eyes before. It's the general feeling they give me.

Looking at those eyes brought a brightly warm and weak feeling to her chest.

終わりのクロニクル

…What is this?

With that thought, her drunken mind prioritized curiosity. As if tempted, she reached a hand out toward the white giant.

And just before she touched it…

"…!"

The light in the giant's eyes suddenly strengthened and it moved.

It took a half step to the side as if avoiding her.

…It's running away.

As it reacted like a frightened animal, it produced a powerful noise and wind. When it stepped into the paddy field, it tore off heads of rice and produced a splashing noise. The foot sinking into the mud produced an equal volume of muddy water flowing onto the gravel road.

It had moved approximately three meters away and Miyako still could not hear any insects or frogs.

In that silence, she looked at the fingers of her outstretched arm and the giant beyond them.

She saw the white giant look down at her as if hanging its head.

"_____"

The giant's head suddenly produced some sort of noise. She could tell it was a male voice, but she did not know what language it was.

But after speaking, the giant turned its back to her.

"Wait," she called out.

But then she gasped in realization.

…What am I doing?

She had gotten drunk after failing an interview and now she was telling a white giant to wait.

Just as she wondered how much of that was normal, the giant made its next move.

The six large wings on its back spread out.

"Wow…"

It had three pairs of main wings with ailerons. The main wings were over five meters long and their flaps rose and fell. She even saw in-wing thrusters which should not have existed in reality.

The wings spread out like a living creature and they blossomed in the moonlight.

What is this? she wondered. *This shouldn't exist.*

But that sense of reality was wiped out by the truth before her eyes.

The spread wings gave off a dignified glow in the moonlight and wind suddenly exploded out.

The white giant flew into the sky.

"!"

Miyako crossed her arms in front of herself, but it was too late. *Uh, oh,* she thought as her body floated up a bit. In the next moment, she fell onto her butt.

The impact itself was not as bad as the pain of the gravel stabbing at her.

But she immediately forced herself through the wind and back to her feet.

She had seen the white giant turn toward her in the instant it jumped up.

Its yellow eyes had seemed afraid of something.

"…"

She opened her mouth, but no words came out. She did not know what to say.

She felt a strange sense of frustration, but she must have sympathized with the giant to have read fear in its eyes. Something similar to that giant's fear resided within herself.

But what was it inside her?

Instead of an answer, she heard a noise. It was a muffled sound as if something were tearing at the wind.

A reverberation of the wind fell from the previously silent sky above.

She looked up and saw a single white cloud drawing a line through the night along the path in which the white giant had flown.

But…

"…!"

Something else came from the sky behind her.

With the sound of something tearing at the wind, a new figure swiftly cut by overhead.

As if showing its intention to whip up the wind, the figure repeatedly accelerated as it passed by above her head. It flew through the night sky while producing a chain of roars resembling the flapping of wings.

Miyako put up with this second wind as she watched. This new figure wrapped in wind and noise was another giant much like the white one from before.

But it was colored a dark black.

The black giant pursued the white giant as it flew through the night sky.

The night sky was chilly and clear.

The black giant flying through the air had four metal wings extending from its back.

The two pairs of four meter long wings were spread out with two toward the sky and two toward the ground.

This action should have created air resistance, but it did not. The pale light emitted from the front of the wings cut through the air and only the necessary amount of air was brought inside the front slit to be stored inside the wing.

The swing-down portion of the wing would then beat down the air.

The atmospheric explosion emitted from the wing's rear thruster accelerated the metal giant upwards.

The distance to the sky above vanished in an instant.

As the black giant ascended, a sharp red light appeared on its face as eyes.

It then located its enemy in the wind, the night, and the sky.

That enemy was the white giant.

The white giant's back was visible at a high enough altitude to be called "the heavens".

It was ascending, so the black giant ascended even further.

As it flapped the wings on its back, a noise came from the black giant.

It was a voice coming from the mouth portion of its face.

"Are they planning to leave the concept space they set up themselves?"

The voice that seemed to be questioning itself might have belonged to a boy or a young man.

And another voice immediately replied. This time, a feminine voice came from that same black machine.

“I don’t know. But if we can end this here, we should use our weapon of destruction.”

A male and female pair spoke within the same craft and the female voice continued.

“Keravnos!”

That name produced movement.

A concept space expanded around the black right arm and the weapon known as Keravnos appeared in pieces.

First, the frame of a spear was emitted from space. The claws on the bottom of the frame locked onto the arm and combined with the rail meant to fire the spear shell. Next, side guiderails and an upper counter-head were emitted from space. Those parts surrounded the top and either side, forming a cannon.

After that, a shock absorber appeared and connected to the back. With the inside complete, the spear shell entered.

The spear shell was made up of three spears, all which glowed white. They were the color of a thunderbolt.

Finally, twelve steel bolts were emitted from space. With six on either side, they drilled into Keravnos one pair at a time. The six-fold harmony of metal closed the weapon, fixed it in place, and made sure it would not budge.

It all occurred in an instant.

“Finished. We can do this!”

Just as the female voice cried out, something happened above the black giant’s head.

The white giant flipped around with the moon above it and the black giant below it.

It almost seemed to collapse backwards until its head was pointed down toward the black giant.

Immediately afterwards, he white giant flapped its wings.

It charged down toward the other giant and toward the ground.

It had been carrying a sword over each shoulder and it was now holding the right one down toward its left waist .

“Here it comes!”

But the black giant also flew. With a large flap of its wings, it calmly soared.

And then music came from the black giant’s mouth.

The boy’s voice sang a song.

—Silent night Holy night

As if riding on the gentle rhythm of the hymn, the black giant accelerated without rushing.

—God’s Son laughs, o how bright

At such great speeds, contact would only last an instant.

—Love from your holy lips shines clear

The descent at greater than free fall speeds and the ascent fighting against the pull of gravity crossed paths.

—As the dawn of salvation draws near

The sword on the left and the spear on the right clashed.

—Jesus, Lord, with your birth

“Go!!”

The song’s final line transformed into a shout as the spear easily broke the sword.

However…

“…!!”

Something odd happened.

The white giant vanished and suddenly appeared to the side. It appeared on the right with zero time lag.

“Did it take our attack again!?” The boy’s voice seemed to forcefully turn around in the sky. “Mikage-san , what was that!?”

“It’s no use! The attack is already here!”

As she had said, the white giant's sword had already been swung down.

"That isn't just teleportation! It's an instant attack!"

With teleportation, the giant's movements afterwards would continue from before, but when it had appeared an instant after vanishing, it had already been swinging the attack.

This was not high speed, invisibility, or teleportation. It was as if the black giant's attack had been taken away.

"What's the trick to this!?"

As he asked that question, evasion and attack crossed paths.

With a great noise, the white giant's sword deflected the firing device at the base of the spear.

And then the white giant crashed into the black giant.

The sound of destroyed metal filled the sky.

Sounds of pain and surprise came from both and the result of the crash showed itself.

The white giant was larger and was moving faster. To eliminate the lingering effects of the impact, it rotated and dropped straight down. But the black giant was knocked through the air with its chest armor and back wings broken.

Its altitude quickly dropped and it approached the surface.

“Kh.”

The black wings spread out. It flapped them at just above the ground to throw its body sideways, but it was too little, too late.

“…!!”

It used all of its leg strength to kick off the ground and forced another strike of the wings to correct its path. It flew in a high-speed horizontal glide and pursued the white giant which was similarly skimming along the surface approximately one hundred meters ahead.

“Damn.”

“Sorry. This is because I am incomplete.”

The boy did not respond to the female voice's comment. After a short pause, she spoke again.

"Did you see Typhon back there?"

"Yes, but what about it?"

After another short pause, the female voice spoke as if checking with herself.

"Its eyes were yellow. …The color was different when we fought it before."

"True," muttered the boy.

The black giant's head tilted as if to ask why, but the female voice cut off the boy's puzzlement.

"Typhon is slowing down."

"Why?"

"I do not know, but this is our chance!"

The black giant nodded at her words.

It continued forward. It kicked off the ground once to leap into the air and then flapped its wings. It was taking a low-angle yet high-speed dive.

And it charged in. It swung Keravnos on its right arm toward the white back it approached.

“Cry out, crushing lightning strike!”

The male and female voices cried out in unison and the stabbing spear was fired while wrapped in light.

As the white giant glided along, it frantically turned around and swung its sword toward the other giant.

“What!?”

Keravnos devoured the sword. The metal sword shattered in an instant and it scattered through the sky.

But the black giant saw where the white giant was headed.

“A person!?”

A woman wearing a white shirt and a beige skirt looked through the sky while walking. It looked like she had lost sight of the giants and was searching for them. She slowly turned her head toward them.

"…"

She caught sight of the approaching white giant and her expression filled with shock and paled.

Seeing that, the white giant took action. It fully spread its wings, drastically lowered its speed, crouched over, and spread its arms.

It moved to protect the woman from the attack approaching from behind.

As the pursuing black giant swung its right arm, it altered the trajectory away from the white giant.

"Dammit!"

The attack could not punch through the white giant.

But the fired spear produced a lightning strike.

Light enveloped the two gods of war and a great rumbling rang out.

Miyako stood on the gravel road which was scorched, broken, and giving off heat.

She was surrounded by an intense light that had fallen from the sky, but she did not close her eyes.

She saw everything that happened. The heat- and light-filled wind brought slight tears to her eyes and made her tremble, but she continued to watch.

It started when the flying white and black giants had descended toward her.

As soon as the one with white wings landed in front of her, the light had come.

Sound raced by around her like she was surrounded by a waterfall and light filled everything. She could tell the hot wind was blowing from below her feet.

She did not remember much else. She had simply suddenly noticed the white giant standing before her.

…Did it protect me as I carelessly wandered around?

She tried to speak her confusion aloud, but she could not form the words.

Her lips were trembling. As were her face, head, abdomen, and knees.

But her eyes looked steadily up at the white giant. She looked up at its face.

Those eyes emitting a yellow light would be there.

As if responding to her thoughts, the giant lowered its head slightly. She could now see its face.

…It's different.

It was a pale blue.

Rather than the yellow light, the white giant's face gave off a pale light.

This is the same color as moonlight, she thought.

In the next instant, the white giant moved. As if refusing to lower its head any longer, it suddenly spread its arms slightly and bent backwards.

"_____!!"

It let out a roar. The roar sounded like a mix between an "ah" and a "gah" and it was clearly a female voice. The foreign-sounding male voice from before was gone. It now produced a pure, bestial, and scream-like voice.

The cry blew away the steam and exposed the moon above.

The entire chilly sky was now visible. The sight made Miyako shudder. She then heard a noise. Something was shaking the air as it approached from behind the white giant.

"The black one…"

The dark giant moved in. It skimmed across the broken paddy field at high speed and instantly arrived from a distance. It was already swinging the spear attached to its right arm.

Miyako heard it give a war cry.

In response, the white giant ended its cry and swung its right arm toward Miyako.

“What?” asked Miyako as the white giant grabbed her.

In no time, the steel fingers had wrapped around her tense body.

She was restrained.

She was lifted up in an instant and then forcefully squeezed.

As she wondered what was happening, the white giant turned around, bringing her with it.

And it held her out toward the black giant.

“I’m a hostage!?”

Even as she almost passed out, she saw the black giant stop when it saw her.

She once again wondered what was happening.

The white giant which had shown her fear had protected her but then taken her hostage once the color of its eyes had changed.

Meanwhile, the black giant had stopped moving upon seeing her despite continually attacking the fearful white giant.

…Which is the good one and which is the bad one?

While held by those five steel fingers, her breath was squeezed from her lungs and she had difficulty drawing in more air. Her breathing was shallow and her vision grew blurry.

And then the white giant flapped its wings.

Just as she felt her body grow heavy, she found herself in the sky.

Her vision had reached the heavens.

The large moon was visible overhead.

She saw the pale color of the moon just before her consciousness cut out.

The black giant stood on the paddy field's gravel road.

After the triple spear on its right arm was dismantled and stored in the concept space, it lowered its right arm.

Afterwards, its shoulders clearly drooped.

The face was clearly turned toward two things on the ground.

Sitting on the gravel were a balled up woman's suit coat and a black bag.

After a moment of silence, it spoke with the boy's voice.

"The concept space will vanish soon, but should we pursue them? They got someone else involved."

The response came from a weak and quiet female voice.

"We can't. I can't send power to the wings properly."

"I see," said the boy's voice.

At the same time, light arrived. This was not the moonlight from above. It came from directly in front of the black giant.

"!?"

The white light pointed directly at the black giant's face.

More lights illuminated its face and body from the sides and back.

And then the black giant saw it. A great number of large forms were visible beyond the hands holding the lights. And several human forms were visible on top of them.

"Are those…?"

They were trucks. The large trucks had surrounded the giant as a barricade.

The lights were approximately fifteen meters away. The giant had not noticed them as they approached. Which meant…

"Did they use some kind of concept?" muttered the male voice.

He received a response from a boy standing in the center of the people lined up on one truck. His hair was slicked back, it had some white mixed in, and his sharp face was turned toward the giant.

"To use the stereotypical phrase, we have you surrounded! Feel free to resist if you like. We have already prepared a stupid but sturdy shield and a beautiful gunner that can shoot through anything as long as she has enough guts!"

"Am I that shield you mentioned, you son of a bitch?" said a well-built young man standing to the boy's left and holding a giant sword.

The girl standing to the boy's right then spoke while holding a giant staff.

"U-um… My Ex-St doesn't use my guts for output. It uses my spirit."

"That's the same thing!"

The girl cowered down as everyone else shouted at her , but the sharp-faced boy in the center patted her shoulder.

He then faced the black giant once more.

“Now, what will you do?”

Rather than the male voice, it was the giant’s female voice that answered.

“What should we do?”

The line of people took defensive stances when they heard that question. Except for one of them.

That one was the sharp-faced boy who had spoken before.

Rather than going on the defensive, he loosely folded his arms and placed his left hand on his chin. It looked like he was evaluating the black god of war.

“Will you fight?” he asked.

“Are you picking a fight?”

"That depends on you." He nodded and calmly continued. "If we do fight, you may come to regret it."

The black giant did not move, but the male voice muttered to himself.

"I give up…"

"Ryuuji-kun?"

"Please shut it down, Mikage-san. These people are not our enemy. Not that they are our ally either."

He took a breath.

"You are from UCAT, aren't you?"

"That is correct."

As the sharp-faced boy answered, the black giant trembled.

The hatch on the bottom of the stomach opened outward.

A short figure jumped out and to the ground. He was a boy wearing black jeans and a white tank top. He had

short hair and a white bandanna wrapped around his forehead.

"Red eyes…"

He gave a troubled smile as he heard that comment from the surrounding people.

"I get these red eyes from my grandfather. …Also, I request protection. Will that suffice, student council members?"

"…?"

Sensing confusion and surprise, the red-eyed boy spoke with a smile.

"I am Hiba Ryuuji from Class 1-F of Taka-Akita Academy. The one about to appear from this god of war is Hiba Mikage. Sayama-san, do you remember me? I'm the grandson of that troublesome old man, Hiba Ryuutetsu."

As he spoke, the boy named Hiba raised his hands. He also stopped between the black giant's legs.

He held his raised arms forward as if to catch something.

“Mikage-san.”

As soon as he spoke that name, the black giant transformed.

No, it was not a transformation. Starting with its limbs, the entire body folded and bent inward until it vanished into thin air.

With the sound of building blocks being piled up, the black craft disappeared.

And just before it did, the back of the craft opened and a human figure fell out.

It was a female figure. The blonde girl wore a black shirt and a white dress.

As she fell, Hiba caught her from below.

The girl, Mikage, did not move. She did not fix her disheveled hair and she merely took repeated deep breaths.

…Is she okay?

As he thought that, Hiba felt something damp in his right hand. Something warm began to cover that hand.

As that warmth caused him to gasp, he heard a voice from above.

"Is she injured? We can treat her."

"We always handle it ourselves, but it looks like that won't happen today."

He realized that everyone surrounding them was staring at Mikage.

He knew why she was drawing their focus. Her visible skin at the neck and hands was different from that of a human. The material resembled human skin, but the joints were black and made with a geometric pattern.

"An automaton," someone said.

That comment caused an even deeper silence to fall which Hiba did not like.

But that silence was broken by Sayama giving instructions.

Hiba took a breath as he heard the footsteps of people frantically beginning to move.

A white-clothed rescue team quickly arrived and spread out a white sheet, so he gently lowered Mikage to the ground behind him. He placed her on the sheet and lightly placed her hands on top of her stomach.

"It'll be okay," he said reassuringly and the rescue team smiled at him.

"We will make sure she is okay."

His smile in response was weak, but he raised his head as he heard the sounds of medical equipment.

He turned around and turned his red eyes in that direction.

"Thank you very much. Please take her to a good doctor."

And then he looked around the area once more.

He first noticed that Sayama was looking his way.

“This is Team Leviathan, isn’t it?”

“Did you hear about us from Hiba-sensei?”

“Yes, but only a bit. Something about winning each Gear to your side, right?”

“Correct. Are you fighting 3rd-Gear?”

As Hiba wondered whether he should answer, Sayama continued speaking.

“This is not just a casual request. I am sure you have your reasons, but could you end your fighting? It will hinder the Leviathan Road with 3rd-Gear.”

“No,” replied Hiba reflexively. His eyebrows rose. “ 3rd-Gear is our opponent. And…I cannot hand them over to you. If you want 3rd-Gear’s Concept Core, then wait until we have settled things with them.”

“Why?”

“An impurity.” Hiba chose his words carefully. “ 3rd-Gear has an impurity. If you touch them, you will be

stained, so we will cleanse that impurity and then give you the Concept Core."

"And until then, you want us to leave you alone?"

Hiba nodded.

After a moment, Sayama folded his arms and a small animal that had climbed to his head mimicked the pose.

"I see. An interesting proposal. According to my horoscope, I am a bit short-tempered today and my lucky word is 'anger', so-…"

"W-wait, Sayama-kun! Don't do anything rash based on the astronomy department's fake horoscopes!" cried a voice from behind the truck.

Sayama frowned and turned toward the voice.

Hiba tilted his head as he thought the voice sounded familiar.

"U-um, we just received word from Ooshiro-san. Is there a Hiba-kun here!? If so, please raise your hand!"

Hiba did as requested. But after a few moments of silence, Sayama looked at him and then on the other side of the truck once more.

"Can you see him from there?"

"O-of course I can!"

"Then answer me this: which hand is he holding up?"

"U-um… Um, uh… The middle one!"

"Please redo your evolution from the microscopic stage. At any rate, what is it?"

"Well," said the voice. "It seems we're supposed to secure Hiba-kun and the girl with him without asking them anything! It sounds like a complicated situation and I didn't really understand it."

"Ha ha ha ha ha. Thank you for being so wonderfully useless, Ooki-sensei."

"Teh heh heh. Stop flattering me."

That was flattery? thought Hiba, but then the name Sayama had mentioned made him recall a famous teacher from his school. *Oh, so that teacher is part of Team Leviathan too.*

…Now I'm worried about the world.

Sayama and the others faced him and Sayama gave him an expressionless look.

"There is a lot I would like to ask you, but we will prioritize the organization here."

"I see."

Hiba looked up and around at the people surrounding him.

They were UCAT members, but they were mostly quite young. A lot of the girls were about his age.

The same was true for the girl standing next to Sayama . She did not seem to be a member of the student council, but…

"Huh?"

She looked familiar, so he tilted his head.

…Isn't that the person named Shinjou who is always with Sayama-senpai? But isn't Shinjou…

"…a boy?" he muttered.

He suddenly shuddered.

As sweat poured down the back of his body, Shinjou spoke to him.

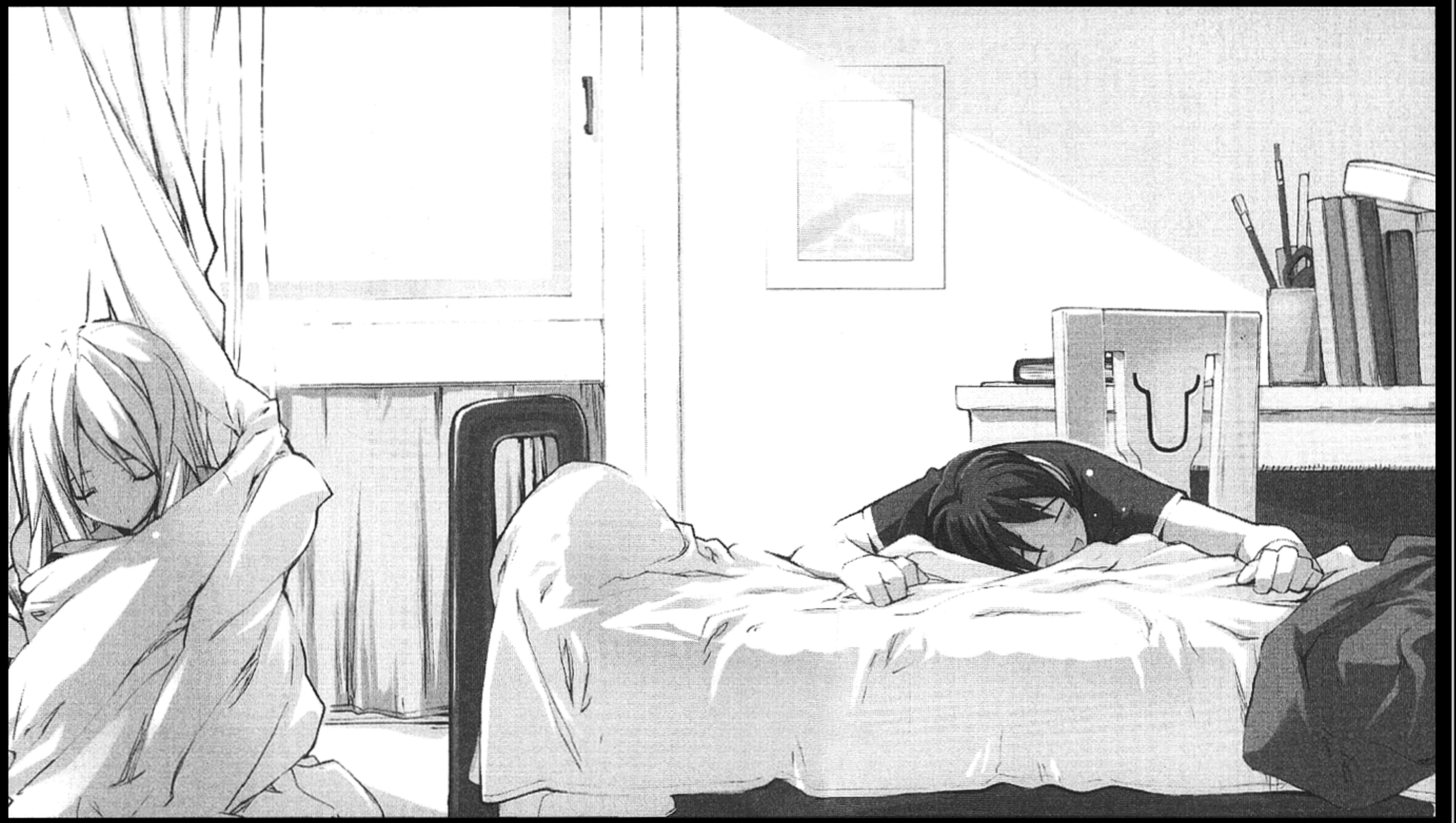
"What is it? You don't look too good."

"Eh? Oh… U-u-u-u-uh… Well…"

He looked around to find something to say. As he did, he looked up at the girls.

"With the design of the girls' uniforms, it feels like I'm peeking up their skirts," he muttered with a serious expression. "Does thinking that make me a pervert?"

Countless silent attacks flew his way.



I want to do this forever
But what am I supposed to do
If I feel a stirring in my heart?

I want to do this forever

But what am I supposed to do

If I feel a stirring in my heart?

—Thinking you are special is old-fashioned.

—Thinking you are normal is even more old-fashioned.

Chapter 1: A Morning Change

Chapter 1

“A Morning Change”

A lot is about to change
A morning of beginnings has made this clear
The moon of early summer remains visible in that morning

A lot is about to change

A morning of beginnings has made this clear

The moon of early summer remains visible in that morning

The air of a summer morning blew through the city.

The sun was beginning to rise, but few cars passed by on the street which was covered in a morning fog.

However, two figures were visible on the sidewalk. Two people were running as the shallow morning sun washed over them from the side. One was a boy in a black track suit and the other was a girl in a white track suit.

They were Sayama and Shinjou.

As they jogged, they entered the giant school alongside the road.

Their path curved ninety degrees away from the cherry trees along the road and toward the school

building to the left. With the gym on their left, they passed by the first general school building and the second general school building (which contained the Kinugasa Library) on their right.

They then turned right and cut between the second and third general school buildings to reach the backs of the buildings.

Sayama then began the last spurt while almost destroying the gravel path below his feet.

"Ah, that's too fast."

Sayama waved to Shinjou behind him as he moved ahead. He also pulled Baku from his pocket and placed the creature on his head.

He quickly reached the emergency staircase on the east side of the second general school building.

He ran up to the second floor landing while taking three steps at a time. That was their usual gathering spot for meetings and private discussions.

"…"

And he arrived.

He looked over the railing toward the empty schoolyard and the sun rising into the sky. Far off in the vast schoolyard were the silhouettes of the strange monuments created by each successive graduating class.

…Such majestic scenery.

He took a breath, loosened his track suit's collar, and made sure Baku was not falling from his head. He then pulled a stopwatch from his pocket.

The LCD time read 5:50 AM. He then glanced at the seconds display below the clock.

"Fourteen minutes for a half circuit. We still have a long way to go."

As he spoke to himself, he turned toward the staircase behind him.

As Shinjou climbed the stairs, she looked up at him from the bend in the staircase.

"Ah."

The instant their gazes met, she mistook her footing as if strength had left her legs.

With a quiet voice of surprise, she threw her body to his side. She fell on her back while holding her hair so as not to get it dirty.

“Ha ha. I guess I got careless.”

She laughed while catching her breath while Sayama stood with his hips lowered and his arms spread forward .

…I thought she was going to leap toward me.

“Sayama-kun, why are you making that pose into empty air?

“It seems not everything goes as one might hope.”

He nodded as Shinjou tilted her head and then he looked across the landing. The morning light showed two things on the landing wall.

Sayama had used his finger to write two things in the filth on the wall.

1st-Gear – Fafnir Custom.

2nd-Gear – Yamata.

Sayama suddenly narrowed his eyes toward the two lines written one above the other.

“Is something the matter?” asked a voice from below.

He looked down and saw Shinjou was still lying on the floor. She brushed up her bangs which had stuck to her forehead with sweat.

She looked up at the wall, but the light prevented her from reading the writing from her angle.

“…?”

She tilted her head, looked back toward him, and showed him a smile.

“It is nothing, Shinjou-kun. Does it bother you?”

“Yes.” She nodded and sat up with the ends of her eyebrows slightly lowered. “You had a similar expression to when your chest hurts.”

"That is worrisome. Perhaps I should visit a doctor."

"Yes… No, wait! You can't go to any of the doctors you know! A-and more importantly…"

For some reason, she frantically stood up and kicked the floor with her right heel despite having just run.

"U-um? What are we going to do about that guy from last night? Hiba…Ryuuji-kun, was it?"

Shinjou's question caused Sayama to cross his arms.

"Hm." He nodded. "You want to know what we are going to do?"

"Yes. I was wondering… No, wait! You shouldn't think too much, Sayama-kun! Especially in the morning!"

"What has you panicking so much? I am thinking about this in a perfectly normal fashion."

"…Just remember. There are some things people simply can't do."

"Ha ha ha. Do not worry, Shinjou-kun. I am perfect. … Why would you grab my collar when I say that?"

"Well, I suppose you are perfect in a way."

"Calm down."

He held out a hand to stop her.

She glared at him while they both leaned against the railing.

"At any rate, we were unable to meet with the Hiba boy since that incident."

He recalled the previous night. The boy claiming to be Hiba Ryuutetsu's grandson and his female automaton partner had been taken into UCAT custody, but they had heard nothing since.

What had he been fighting using that god of war?

It seemed the investigation team had found white armor fragments on the ground.

Hiba's god of war had been black.

"He must have been fighting a white god of war. … Most likely one belonging to 3rd-Gear."

"Do you think it was Typhon?"

"I cannot say for sure, but the odds are good. The Hiba boy's god of war had wings and it used them in battle. It was on an entirely different level than the UCAT god of war attempting a triple axel underground. And do you remember Ooki-sensei's announcement just before we headed out?"

He took a breath.

"She said there were two huge readings. …Who would have thought she would ever teach us something useful? "

"I'm going to ignore that last part, okay? …Anyway, she uses the concept-related equipment, so can we assume these were on the level of a Concept Core for her to call them 'huge'?"

"If so, the white one would be Typhon which is powered by half of 3rd-Gear's Concept Core. We do not

know where the black one came from, but this would mean it possesses half of a Concept Core. If only we knew how he acquired that god of war."

They had waited in the front lobby to speak with Hiba and the others, but Abram had arrived and ordered them to leave.

…3rd-Gear's Leviathan Road has yet to begin and we are forced to avoid the related people.

This almost confirmed that the boy named Hiba had some connection to 3rd-Gear.

"The real mystery is why we were not allowed to speak with him."

"The higher ups must have decided there is some reason why we must not be allowed to meet with him. He is refusing to work with the Leviathan Road for some reason and UCAT also thinks we should stay away from him."

"He said something about an impurity and that he would cleanse it."

"Yes, but we were not even allowed to ask about that."

After leaving UCAT last night, Izumo, Kazami, Shinjou, and Sayama had travelled by train and motorcycle before meeting back up in Oume. After leaving the station, they had discussed their plans at a fast food restaurant.

While folding his arms above the railing, Sayama restated their conclusion from that meeting.

"UCAT will not allow us to approach him, but we wish to know what this impurity is and who he was fighting. And he attends our school, so we can approach him if we want. …UCAT will have realized that much."

Then…

"How about we act as students rather than as Team Leviathan? We have recently discovered an interesting underclassman and wish to speak with him as the student council. We can discuss his personal situation while we are at it."

The smile in his voice produced a bitter smile from Shinjou.

As her eyebrows relaxed slightly, she glanced over at him.

"That is disobeying orders."

"It is nothing more than a normal student council activity. Kazami is likely contacting him right about now. The Hiba boy will receive word from his homeroom teacher that the student council has summoned him. Basically, he is being told to meet us behind the school. Heh heh heh. No one in the school can disobey Kazami if she tells them that. We can look forward to this, Shinjou-kun."

"Yes… She seems to be well-known among the freshmen. I think it's because she kicked Izumo-san from the rooftop stage during the school band concert for the All Holiday Festival back in May."

"It had something to do with the force of his shout, didn't it? The first years panicked, but the second and third years knew it was coming. The cheers for Kazami and cries of 'gung-ho' made it quite an amazing performance. You can tell Kazami has grown accustomed to this. She made sure to finish singing all the songs before collecting Izumo from the pond he fell into."

"Schools make for both good and bad memories, don't they? And I'm stating that as kindly as I can."

Shinjou's shoulders drooped and she sighed. She then grabbed the railing and stretched lightly.

"Anyway, Sayama-kun, are you planning on 3rd-Gear for the next Leviathan Road?"

Sayama did not immediately respond.

He looked back toward the writing on the wall and then nodded.

"That would be the next one if we are to continue in order. Also…it depends on our meeting today."

"I see. I wonder how it'll go. And if we go up against 3rd, we'll really be faced with gods of war, won't we?"

As she muttered that, a slight wind suddenly gathered around her body.

"…Ah."

As her hair shook and she twisted her body a little, a faint mist of white steam appeared around her.

But the mist vanished in an instant and she remained still while gently holding her own body. She shrank down with red tinging her cheeks.

"I-I just became Setsu…"

"I do not see why that is anything to blush over."

Shinjou shook her head.

"I-it's embarrassing. When I choose what to wear, I'm deciding which one I will be. When I'm in the dorm room with you, I can take it easy and just be Sadagiri, but I have to be either Sadame or Setsu while outside. Before I revealed my identity, I had to be Sadame during the day, so I was prepared to dress as a girl, but…"

"But now is different?"

She gave a small nod.

"I think it's because I haven't had to dress as a girl much lately due to being in the dorm. Maybe I'm being

too self-conscious, but when I change without planning for it, my preparations such as clothing are all wrong. … It makes me feel naked. I find it hard to face forward and continue walking."

"But you always wear Sadame-kun's equipment at UCAT and sometimes train from evening into the night …"

"I view that more as my equipment than specifically Sadame's equipment. There are also some normal clothes that I feel comfortable both ways in. Like pajamas for example. Also, I feel more comfortable if I change my clothes after the change, even if I'm changing right back into the same clothes. At the Tamiya house, I use their bathroom for that."

As she spoke, she seemed to realize something and smiled bitterly while bringing a hand to her mouth.

"Thank you for staying with me even when I continue talking about Setsu and Sadame after you said Sadagiri is fine."

"If being with you is enough to receive your thanks, how about we be together even more, Shinjou-kun? … Anyway, are you feeling naked as Setsu-kun right now?"

"Yes. Especially around the chest and butt… I don't want to meet anyone before reaching the dorm."

Sayama realized she was covering herself with her arms despite wearing the track suit.

"There is a way to resolve this."

"Eh? There is?"

"Yes. Change clothes here so you feel more comfortable."

"…What?"

After a moment, she began to panic.

"I-I was careless! Forget it! Forget it, Sayama-kun! I-I-I-I'm fine!"

"No need to worry. I am not so heartless that I would make you walk around outside while mentally naked." He turned his back, looked up into the blue sky, and spread his arms. "Now, change clothes while my back is turned."

He waited five seconds. When he did not hear the rustling of clothes, he turned around. He saw Shinjou taking small, tiptoeing steps down the stairs.

“Shinjou-kun! You need not force yourself!”

But then he realized what Shinjou was doing. He silently rushed down toward Shinjou who had reached the turn in the stairway.

“I see. So you are going to change in the shadow of the staircase? That is a most sensible idea, Shinjou-kun!”

“In what world is that sensible!?”

She stopped and turned around with her eyebrows raised.

And Sayama collided with her as he ran down the stairs.

“Eh? Ah…wah!”

They tripped down the stairs.

In that instant, Sayama had to make a decision. He had to decide between protecting Shinjou from harm and helping her change her clothes.

…Which one do I choose!?

He rolled down the stairs and out into the schoolyard behind the building.

I hit my back, he realized as he looked up. There he saw the sky…and Shinjou's face.

She was frowning with her eyes closed and clinging to his chest as he lay on his back.

She was unharmed, so he muttered to himself.

"…Good."

"Th-this is not good. What if you're hurt?"

She frantically got up and looked at him. Seeing the look of worry in her eyes, he nodded, raised his arms, and spoke in a calming tone.

"I am unharmed and neither are you. …That is what I deemed good. I made the right decision."

"What decision?"

"The decision between protecting you from harm and helping you change your clothes."

"There is quite a difference between those two options. But still…"

She sighed and the tension left her body. She leaned her warm and soft body on him once more.

"Thank you."

"I am glad to hear you say that. I truly was not mistaken to choose both options."

"…Eh?"

She questioningly touched her butt and felt her underwear.

The face lying on his chest paled in surprise for an instant and quickly grew red.

"W-wait! Sayama-kun! Where are my pants!?"

"If you are to change back into them, you must first take them off, Shinjou-kun." He then pulled the folded track suit pants from under his head. "And without this, I would have hit my head. It is my turn to thank you."

"Yes, yes. I'm glad I could be of some help. …Now give them back."

"You must remove the top first."

"Eh? S-stop! Don't try to take off the top!"

As he lifted the track suit far enough to see her sweaty stomach, she frantically held it down with her hands.

"C-c-c-c-c-c-calm d-d-d-d-down, Sayama-kun."

"I think you need to calm down first. And as you do, I will take care of this."

"Eh?" she asked as he reached for the underwear covering her butt and tried to peel it away. "N-no!! The bottom is even worse! You can't do this here!"

She frantically sat up.

She straddled his body to prevent him from removing her underwear.

But even if she said no, she had been the one to recommend changing her clothes, so he knew there was no problem with his actions.

“Shinjou-kun, why do you grow so flustered and reject what you yourself suggested?”

“Because you are insane!!”

Suddenly, several footsteps passed by.

A line of the blue uniforms belonging to the girls volleyball team passed by for their early morning training.

They all smiled and nodded as they passed, so Sayama waved and nodded back.

After a while, the footsteps disappeared into the distance and Shinjou slowly collapsed. Her forehead struck his chest.

“…It’s over. This is going to start more strange rumors .”

"Heh heh heh. The normal students do not know the truth. This is filling me with a sense of superiority."

"That isn't the issue! What are we going to do? They'll spread a rumor that I was straddling you while wearing girls' underwear!"

"It is not a rumor if it is true, Shinjou-kun. I intend to gladly accept this truth for the sake of history."

"That's just another fabricated truth in the History According to Sayama!!"

As her voice reverberated through the air, an electronic tone sounded.

It was Sayama's cell phone. He pulled it from his pocket and saw it was from UCAT. As Shinjou looked up in surprise, he answered.

"It is I."

And…

"What is it, Sibyl-kun? I am busy undressing Shinjou-kun."

Suddenly, someone began strangling him.

In a dimly lit room, someone suddenly sat up in a bed.

It was a boy. He was short and he wore a black T-shirt and shorts while sleeping. Below his short hair, he had a scar running in a diagonal line along his forehead and his eyes were not a normal color.

They were red.

He gasped for breath and pulled up the light blanket while bringing a hand to his face with a blank yet panicked expression.

"…"

He crossed his legs and leaned forward on the bed. He knitted his brow and his eyes focused on the room before him.

A curtain covered the window and blocked out the light of that summer morning.

A metalworking desk with a vise attached sat next to the window.

The bookcase next to the desk contained maps and specialized books on using bladed weapons and martial arts.

Everywhere else, the walls were completely covered by vests, work pants, and other clothes hanging on them. All of them were dirty from years of use.

The two picture frames hanging above the desk were the room's only non-practical items.

The two frames contained school diplomas. They were from elementary school and middle school and they both contained the name Hiba Ryuuji.

The boy looked at his own name written there.

"…"

Silently, he moved the two fingers on his face. He let out a slow breath as he touched his forehead. He spent several minutes doing so.

And as he exhaled, sweat from his forehead travelled down his fingers.

Rather than wiping away the sensation, he closed his eyes, breathed in, and opened his mouth.

"What a horrible dream."

His dream had been a reliving of a battle with 3rd-Gear's god of war.

…Was that the battle from last year?

On that night, the black god of war piloted by him and Mikage had flown west in search of 3rd-Gear's headquarters. They had ended up in the Osaka region.

Their god of war and the enemy's one could both function in this Gear without expanding a concept space using a philosopher's stone.

But 3rd-Gear always fought after bringing his and Mikage's god of war into a concept space.

He had never spoken with 3rd-Gear. According to his grandfather, most of the 3rd-Gear survivors were automatons and most of them could not function in Low-Gear.

The green god of war that had appeared before his eyes had likely been remotely controlled by the automatons and the battle had occurred inside a concept space in the plains of Osaka.

—Metal is alive.

In that concept, metal bodies truly held life. Hiba and Mikage's god of war had undergone a philosopher's stone treatment which allowed it to function in Low-Gear , but it was no different. That treatment allowed it to use its abilities as a machine.

A true god of war was a type of living machine.

Under the effects of the concept that gave metal life, Hiba's body, which contained a single life, was broken down by the god of war's dismantling mechanism and inserted into the different mechanisms of the god of war. This allowed him to join with the god of war. Rather than piloting it, he felt more like his body had transformed

into the machine. He did not know the exact method used.

…But it feels like melting.

The eight meter giant was a weapon that used a frame as bones, replaced its muscles with cylinders and artificial muscles, sensed using devices, and controlled its power with a living mind.

Hiba understood that was how gods of war worked.

The battle that night had ended quickly.

As the green god of war had swung its sword on the surface, Hiba had backed away.

A song had escaped his lips. It had been the hymn titled Silent Night.

…The song from my memories.

Mikage had sung that song on the night his family had taken her in as an automaton.

His father had left Mikage with them and then he had never returned from his job.

That had been ten years before.

Hiba had fought while singing the song that had thoroughly permeated him.

The enemy's sword had flown toward him along the shortest route.

It had flown in a horizontal line to the right and then back to the left. After he had opened some distance, it had stabbed forward as he landed.

That had been the timing.

He had looked at the moonlight shadow on the ground rather than directly at the enemy's sword.

That jab had to be looked at in three dimensions, but the shadow had been only two dimensions. Using that, he had calculated just the height and slipped beneath the sword.

With a roar, he had succeeded.

His right fist had half-forcibly broken the green god of war. Its armor had split, the artificial muscles and frame inside had bent and broken, and the abdomen had been knocked diagonally.

This had produced the sound of heavy metals being destroyed.

Once his opponent could not move, he had kicked the green god of war as if sweeping it away.

With the sound of crumbling dirt, the green wreckage had rolled below the moon.

…Now I can rest easy for the moment.

But as soon as he had thought that, something else had arrived.

A giant white form had descended from the sky to his right.

He had once heard of this god of war from his grandfather. He had heard a god of war had been made as a pair to his black one and that it used half the Concept Core as a power source. It was Typhon.

He had recognized it in an instant.

And it had moved differently.

…Someone's inside it.

Defeating it could kill the pilot.

But he had reflexively chosen to attack.

He had done so because the enemy had already been charging toward him.

…Can I do this!? No… I have to!

He had picked up the green god of war's sword and attacked Typhon.

The silver weapon had flown diagonally up from the bottom left in almost a perfectly straight line.

Even if this attack was evaded, Hiba could defend by holding the sword at the middle right.

As if in response, Typhon had stepped in and drawn its own weapon from its right shoulder. It had been a large white sword. The blade had been straight and thick and it had been filled with a lingering light.

Its movements had not been as regulated as the remote controlled ones and it had attacked with pure strength.

Typhon had roared as it attacked.

"…!"

Someone had supposedly been piloting it, but the voice had not sounded human.

The voice had sounded female and it had pierced through everything like a scream or cry of anger.

Hiba had gathered all his strength and repelled the roar. He had forcibly ignored it and taken action.

In the next instant, his sword had struck the enemy's sword.

He had held the blade firmly and went in for a second attack.

The angular facial structure of the enemy's face had contained blue lights for eyes.

…They look like the moonlight.

As soon as he had that thought, their blades had struck . Or they should have.

Something odd had happened instead.

The white god of war had suddenly vanished.

"…!?"

In the next instant, he had heard Mikage's voice.

"Ryuuji-kun! An attack is coming from the right!"

He had reacted to Mikage's shout coming from the voice device.

"!!"

It had all begun again.

All thoughts had vanished from his mind and he had moved purely on reflex.

He had flown forward to move out of the way.

And that decision had saved him.

He had evaded the attack.

The large sword had scraped his metal right cheek and passed by.

He had felt the wind produced by the strike on the god of war's skin. He had known the strike was powerful enough to decapitate him.

He had heard quick pursuing footsteps behind him.

…What is going on!? I thought I attacked it!

His enemy had stolen his turn to attack.

And so he had turned around. Cautious of that previous disappearance, he had taken a defensive stance.

An attack had come. It had been a fast, heavy, repeating, yet normal attack.

When he had deflected the sword with his own blade as the sword had swung down toward him, the enemy

had then rotated at high speed by creating an explosion of air from its left wings. As it had rotated, it had sent the second strike. When he had moved back as the fierce horizontal slash arrived, the white god of war had purposefully let its sword fly wide through the air and thrown a reverse roundhouse kick as it continued to rotate.

The repeated large, swinging attacks had been similar to a constant rotation.

And Hiba had made a certain decision when faced with that rotation.

"…!"

He had flown.

The black god of war had evaded upwards and into the sky behind it. As night approached morning, it had flown into the sky with the moon.

He had put some distance between them, but he had had no intention of stopping there. If his opponent was going to continue rotating its sword like that…

"I can throw in a wedge to stop the rotation!"

As the white god of war had rotated the large sword in a raised position, Hiba had thrown his sword down at it.

He had thrown the blade at close range like it was a spear. He had targeted the white god of war's face.

But the metallic noise it had produced was the sound of the sword shattering in midair.

But that had been fine.

He had swung his right fist and quickly descended.

It had been a power dive with all his weight behind his right fist. If it connected, it would mess up his arm while smashing his opponent's facial structure.

"!!"

He had accelerated.

…*Go.*

He had swung down his right fist while descending.

And in that instant, he had seen something.

This time he saw it more clearly.

The white god of war had vanished before his eyes.

“What?”

It had been the same as before. Just as their swords had not clashed earlier, it had neutralized his attack.

He had recalled what he had seen a moment earlier.

…When I attacked, it disappeared and attacked from a blind spot!

“Then will it attack from a blind spot again!?”

Before he had even finished speaking, the truth had presented itself in the form of an attack.

But it had been an attack that could not exactly be called an attack.

Just before he had landed, a fist had struck him from behind.

“!?”

It had been a light strike as if telling him to get down to the ground or to open up some space.

But the timing of the attack had been strange. The instant after Typhon had vanished had not been enough time to swing its fist. The fist had struck the very moment after Typhon had disappeared.

It could not have used this attack in that time.

All attacks had a stance to use them from and a movement that let the attack reach the enemy. Those things required a certain amount of time.

But in the instant Hiba had attacked from his stance, Typhon had appeared in his blind spot and attacked without any preparation time.

He had not known how it worked. All he had known was that his time to attack had been taken away.

The black god of war had fallen to its knees, so he had frantically stood up and swiftly stepped forward.

He had then turned around to look behind him. He had seen a white form floating in the sky there.

It had been Typhon. The white god of war had stood with its back to him in the spot he had been in a moment earlier.

…What was that attack just now?

If it had attacked with its sword rather than its fist, he would have been killed.

"Was that supposed to be a warning?"

Without giving him any answers, Typhon had turned just its head toward him.

He had seen Typhon's eyes. Earlier, the eyes had contained a pale blue light similar to the moon.

"They're yellow."

As if to affirm the voice that had escaped the black god of war, Typhon had faced forward.

And an explosion of wind had occurred a moment later.

Typhon had flown.

He had stretched out his hand, but it had not been in time.

"!"

Before he had even been able to pursue, Typhon had accelerated away.

He had power, but he had been unable to pursue or fight.

"Kh…"

That was when he had woken from the dream.

He took a breath and opened his eyes.

He no longer found himself in that dark space with the moon at the peak. He was in a small room filling with the morning light. It was his room, a room built around fighting.

"This really is a small room."

He wiped the sweat from his brow, touched the scar, and got out of bed.

The feeling of the gaps between floorboards on the bottom of his feet was very different from the feeling of the ground on the bottom of the god of war's feet from his dream. The scale was much smaller, but it was much more relaxing.

He then left the room. He opened the door and entered the second floor hallway. The second floor contained nothing but the stairs leading down to his right and Mikage's room across the hall.

The landing window had no curtain, so he saw the morning light and heard the chirping of the birds.

He sighed and his shoulders finally relaxed. He then faced the opposite door.

"I need to wake Mikage-san."

Morning sometimes came early for Tsukuyomi Miyako and sometimes it did not.

She had few classes now that she was in her fourth year of university and she could choose to take classes that started closer to noon. She had recently been waking

up early to look for a job, but she would never wake up early without an alarm clock.

And at the moment, she heard no alarm.

As she started to doze off again, she felt light on the outside of her eyelids.

…It must be morning.

As she judged the time, she remembered she had the entire day off. She had no classes, the employment department had not called for her, and she had no interviews scheduled. Her mother would be at IAI for work.

…I guess I'll eat some breakfast, take a short break, and go rent some DVDs or something.

She had taken a liking to the romance drama " A-Another Proposal" that she had started renting recently. The protagonist was a hardcore stalker and his persistent advances while always saying "just this once, just this once" had real intensity. During the last episode, he had been beaten up and thrown from a bridge into a ravine, but she knew that was not enough to kill him.

"I hope they have a copy left."

As she spoke sleepily, her voice was surprisingly clear. She decided that meant her body had woken up. She focused and noticed she was wrapped in a soft blanket and resting her head on a large pillow.

But then she remembered that she slept in a futon and used a buckwheat pillow.

"…?"

Doubt entered her mind, but she was unsure what exactly this doubt meant. She was sleeping peacefully, but her bedding was different. What was she supposed to make of that?

And as if to further her doubt, a young female voice spoke.

"Princess, lunch is ready."

The words were oddly overlapped as if she were hearing two voices at once. She had been unable to quite catch one, but the one she heard clearly was perfectly understandable.

"Who are you calling a princess?"

With that question, she opened her eyes. As her eyes focused, she first saw the color.

Specifically, she saw white.

The ceiling was large and pure white. The dried surface measured about thirty square meters and she was surrounded by four walls made of the same material. A thick window on the wall to the left let in the outside light. She slept on a bed, she was covered by a blanket made of a glossy white material, and someone stood to her right.

"Who are you?"

She looked up from the pillow at the person.

…A foreign woman?

She had long blonde hair and blue eyes. She looked a little bit older than Miyako and her clothes were rather unique.

"A maid?"

And this woman was not the only one. Miyako lowered her gaze and saw at least a few dozen people surrounding her while making sure not to block the light from the window. And they all wore the same outfit.

"…What?"

She looked across the unexpected scene.

All of the maids gave looks of surprise and joy over the fact that she had woken up.

They all let out expectant breaths and tried to take a step toward her.

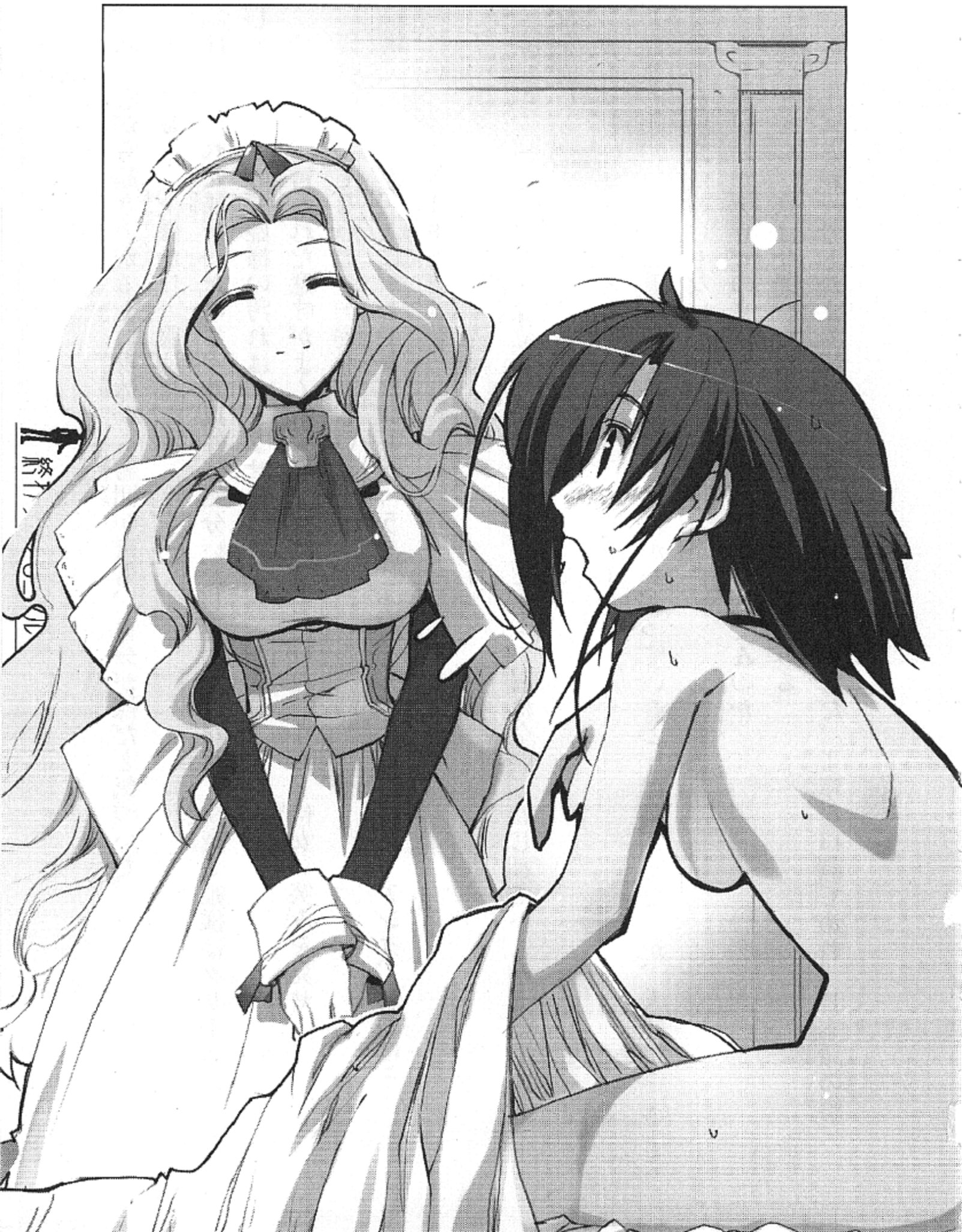
"Please wait a moment, everyone."

The same voice as before gently stopped the others.

Miyako turned toward the older maid standing to the right of the bed.

The maid looked at her with a relaxed expression.

She turned to face towards her rather than look down at her. Noticing that, Miyako sat up. The others began to move as she did, but the nearby maid stopped them with a light wave of a hand.



…So she's the leader.

Once she finished sitting up and the blanket fell from her, she realized she was naked.

"Whoa! I'm naked!? Where're my clothes!?"

"They were very dirty, so we disposed of all but the underwear. You have been quarantined and cleaned, so you are not dirty, princess."

"What?"

Miyako tilted her head in confusion and the maid smiled.

"You are not dirty, so do not worry."

"Y-y'know, you shouldn't talk about people being dirty. …More importantly, what's your name?"

"I am Moira 1st."

"What? Say that again?"

Miyako brushed up her hair, raised a knee, and stared at the maid. She fully wrinkled her brow, but the maid's smile never wavered.

"I am the first unit of the Moira series, so I am Moira 1st."

Miyako truly was hearing some other language overlapping with the maid's voice, but it would be impossible for a human to speak like that.

…Am I hearing a radio or television from somewhere nearby ?

As she thought, Miyako thought on what she had just been told.

She did not know what the maid meant by "unit" or " series", but this was a foreigner. Her speech may have been polite, but there was a good chance her interpretation of Japanese was wrong. It was a sad story of the wonderful depth of the Japanese language. And if that was the case…

"Does this facility belong to some other country?"

"Yes. From your perspective it belongs to another world."

"I see," she said with a nod.

She had found the truth. She was in some eccentric foreigner's mansion.

As she tried to figure out why she was here, she came to a certain realization.

…I have no memories of last night.

What was going on?

"Is something the matter? Is the wiring of your brain out of order?"

"No. Um…listen. Why am I here?"

"Last night…we found you while you were passed out drunk, so we brought you here for your protection."

There had been a slight pause after the words "last night". Miyako whistled inwardly and asked herself what that meant.

"I was drunk? I remember drinking at Shinjuku. I remember that much."

"You…remember?"

"Yeah."

She looked up at the maid's face and found the same smile, but she found that odd.

Normally, one's expression would change when asking someone a question.

"Also, I didn't let myself drink enough to pass out or anything. I remember riding the train to Oume. A perverted old man touched my butt on the way, so I kicked him, kneed him, and then stomped on his crotch. I remember dragging him out at Oume, getting on the train to Okutama, and leaving at Ikusabata Station."

As she talked through it, her memories returned. She omitted mentioning what had led to the drinking. She never mentioned what the interviewer had said to her.

…Can I prove myself, hm?

She could not. There was no way she could. She had never actually gone out into the field. And so she had gone drinking.

She reminded herself that was from the past and focused on bringing back her memories.

"…"

But she stopped speaking there.

Her memories of what happened after leaving Ikusabata Station were gone. Her awareness of her existence was gone.

"What did I do then…?"

"As I said, you passed out drunk."

"Are you mocking me? That definitely didn't happen," she declared firmly.

"Why do you say that?" asked Moira 1st while loosening her smile ever so slightly.

"I made a promise a long time ago."

Moira 1st responded to her concise answer with a nod and did not press the matter further.

She then spoke so the others could hear.

“Princess, I believe you are tired. Shall we bring you your food?”

“Do as you wish. Bring me my clothes too. And…”

As she spoke, she searched through her mind, but could not find the memories. It felt like she could not clear her head.

“A cig. …You have some, don’t you? Some nice ones. I need something harsh to wake me up.”

“A cig?”

“Ahh, this is the problem with foreigners. …A cigarette. Tobacco.”

Despite the explanation, Moira 1st only tilted her head. Miyako smiled bitterly in her heart as she realized how little of the language these people seemed to understand.

"Fine then." She gestured as if holding something in her mouth. "Y'know, the long skinny things made of wrapped paper. You've got some, right?'

"We do!"

The voice came from the entrance behind all the others .

Miyako looked up toward the energetic voice and saw a girl running forward through the wave of maids.

This maid also had blonde hair, but it was only semi-long. Her blue eyes approached.

"This was in the prizes Aigaion brought! Is this what you mean!?"

The maid held out a white stick poking out of a small paper box.

Miyako looked at the girl while taking it. She was a short girl with conspicuous blue eyes. She looked about five years younger than Miyako.

…This kind of underclassman would obsessively hang around me in high school.

"Who are you?"

"Moira 3rd! I created your fake mem- gh!"

Moira 1st gently yet forcefully grabbed the girls' head from behind.

"My apologies. This is our youngest sister. She was rolled out before she had learned enough."

"I'm not quite sure what you mean, but it's good for kids to be energetic."

"See, big sis! She praised me for being energetic! It's a good thing!"

"Heh heh. 3rd? You are not energetic; you are hyperactive. Lower your brain's thought level to energetic. Do you want to be spanked until your legs fall from their joints again?"

"Cheh…"

Miyako sighed as she watched Moira 3rd and Moira 1st who held the girl.

…This is quite the family.

But if there was a 1st and 3rd, there was likely a 2nd. And there had to be a master of the facility as well.

She wondered where they were.

She relaxed her shoulders while feeling dissatisfied at not being able to see everything.

"When can I leave this place?"

"We will discuss that later. Please wait a bit. We will bring you food and clothes first.

"Thanks," she said while staying on her guard.

…This all smells fishy.

At any rate, she had a cigarette to fuel her. Now she was prepared to give this some real thought. She just needed a light to switch on her brain.

She wondered if someone would bring a lighter if she stuck the cigarette in her mouth.

As all the maids watched, she placed it in her mouth.

While aware of all the gazes on her, she breathed in on the unlit cigarette.

“Wait, you idiot! This is a chocolate cigarette! And it’s pickled seaweed flavored!? Is this made by IAI!?”

Light filled the room.

The white lace curtain was drawn and the window was open.

No one was in the bed by the window and no one sat in the chair in front of the opposite desk.

The boy named Hiba was peering inside the room.

He knocked on the door he had started to open.

“Mikage-san?”

She was not there. He saw no one on the pale green carpet either.

"Mikage-saaan. If you don't come out, I'll start searching through the room."

As he called out quietly, he tiptoed into the room.

First, he peeked under the bed, but there was no one there.

Odd, he thought as he looked meaninglessly from left to right.

He placed a hand on Mikage's bed and could still feel warmth. That was her body heat.

It's so warm, he thought calmly before frantically shaking his head.

"Th-this makes me look like a pervert. I need to stop."

But it is warm, he thought as he calmed down.

It did not help that he was exhausted from the previous dream. He kneeled next to the bed and collapsed his upper body on top of it as if bowing.

It was warm. He noticed a faint citrus smell which reminded him of her hair's scent.

After staying like that for about ten seconds, he slowly and reluctantly got up.

He peeked under the desk behind him, but there was no one there either. He then glanced on top of the desk.

"…"

He saw three things there: a thick diary, a thick red mechanical pencil, and a Japanese language textbook.

The textbook was for the first year of middle school. The back cover was facing up and the name Hiba Ryuuji was written on it.

He stood up once he saw that. His expression softened and he turned toward the window with a slight smile.

The window led out to a balcony, but…

"Mikage-san wouldn't be out there since her legs don't work well."

And so he approached the window and crouched down. The curtain was gathered around one side of the east-facing window and a person had sunk into the waves of the curtain.

It was Mikage.

Her blonde hair had not been brushed since she had woken up and she was wrapped in the lace curtain while wearing the white dress she slept in.

Hiba looked at her neck.

The skin peeking through the lace curtain and the dress had different colors.

Some was a flesh color so light it was almost white and some was almost black. The black portions drew the tendons of her neck and had the same composition as the muscles below her skin.

And on the upper part of her sternum from her neck to her chest was another color.

This part was blue

A small blue stone was inserted into her skin.

He watched as the blue stone gently reflected the morning sun.

"She's been like this for five years now. Her body, her legs, and her voice."

He hung his head down a bit.

"And it's all because I can't protect her and I can't gather the Concept Core."

His words fell quietly to the floor.

He had to win. He had to win the fight for her sake.

…But what will happen then?

What would happen once the fight was over?

The fact that he did not know caused his expression to change. His eyebrows and mouth twisted.

At the same time, Mikage moved slightly.

It was a small motion. Her eyelids opened and her eyes focused.

He quickly changed his expression back to normal.

Her black eyes looked up at him.

After a moment, he turned his scarlet eyes toward hers .

She tilted her head as if to ask why he was here.

But her expression quickly changed to a smile and her lips moved a bit.

"…"

She produced no voice.

Hiba knew why. Her vocal cords were still immature.

…She can only speak while combined with me in the god of war.

She produced her silent voice. They had continually practiced together in the hopes that she would speak, so he could read her lips.

"Uuih-uh."

Ryuuji-kun.

"Ah ih ih?"

What is it?

He read her lips and nodded.

"We got back late last night, so I thought you might still be asleep."

He then gently removed the curtain from around her. As if peeling away the curtain, he produced the white dress within. He took a breath and picked up her body which was taller than his own.

She was not surprised. He always did this.

…I need to win.

At the very least, he felt the need to win so that he could protect these everyday things.

But he had a sudden thought about Typhon, the white god of war he had faced the previous night and before.

According to his grandfather, it was 3rd-Gear's strongest god of war.

…It can instantly switch between offense and defense.

If it could do so repeatedly, he was unsure he could defeat it.

As he wondered what to do, he saw Mikage's mouth open.

"Ah ih ih?"

"Eh? Oh, it's nothing. I was just thinking is all."

The ends of her eyebrows were lowered, so he smiled reassuringly.

That was when he heard a woman's voice from beyond the door and down the stairs.

"Ryuuji-san? The school just called."

"Huh? What is it, mom?"

"Oh, dear. Did you go in Mikage-san's room again? Listen. You're an adult now."

"Yes, yes, yes. You can give me the lecture later."

Mikage's shoulders shook slightly in laughter as he held her.

As he watched that, he heard his mother's voice again.

"Your homeroom teacher called to say the student council wants to speak with you. They apparently said it is about last night and that you would understand what that means."

His mother's voice contained no emotion.

"It seems those UCAT members are fairly clever."

Chapter 2: Meeting of Steel

Chapter 2

“Meeting of Steel”

Stare, stare
First, face each other
Then, either hit each other or pass each other by

Stare, stare

First, face each other

Then, either hit each other or pass each other by

A white hallway had no windows, but it did have writing on the wall.

That writing said BF2.

This was Japanese UCAT's second basement floor and the hallway passed in front of the development department. The center of the hallway had a rest area with a sofa and a few vending machines.

A woman stared at the floor in front of the coffee vending machine.

Her long gray hair hung down over the chest of her lab coat which contained a nametag reading Tsukuyomi Chizuru.

She took a sip of the cold coffee in the paper cup she held.

“What is going on?”

“What is it?” asked a sudden female voice.

Tsukuyomi frantically tuned around and saw who was walking down the hallway.

“Diana Zonburg.”

“Is something the matter?” Diana wore a black suit and held a brown paper bag. “I heard you were travelling to Kanda this afternoon to retrieve an examination device for Georgius.”

“Eh? Oh, so talk of that has reached the higher levels, has it? UCAT Director Ooshiro was opposed to the idea, but our younger members offered to help him make a perverted game in exchange.”

“So a mysterious concept weapon is worth the same as an 18+ game?”

"Only when using the Ooshiro currency. …More importantly, what are you doing here?"

Tsukuyomi gulped down her coffee while Diana squeezed the paper bag in her arms.

"I just bought a swimsuit at the store up above and I was taking a stroll through UCAT on my way back."

"A swimsuit? How luxurious."

"No, this is part of my job as inspector. Team Leviathan is apparently having a training camp at the Seto Inland Sea the day after tomorrow, so I will be going with them. …This is a job. Let me spell it out for you: this is a j-o-b."

"Well, it's quite a luxurious j-o-b."

"You don't believe me?"

"The float sticking out of that bag makes it hard to."

"Th-this isn't a float. It is a beach mat to lie on while sipping on a drink."

"How luxurious a time are you planning!?" shouted Tsukuyomi before sighing and facing Diana who was adjusting the contents of the bag. "If I was only five years younger, I would have gone with you."

"U-um, did I mishear that? I thought I heard a number about ten times too small."

"You're supposed to laugh. But when I see you and Doctor Chao, it makes the longevity and anti-aging techniques look pretty good. I was already on the way to being an old lady by the time I joined UCAT, though."

"Heh heh. But you decided to stay with Low-Gear, right?"

After a pause, Tsukuyomi nodded and narrowed her eyes.

"Yes. I have a daughter, so I can't undergo the anti-aging techniques," she said. "Have you heard? My daughter was abducted. And the rumor is that Typhon, that white 3rd-Gear god of war, did it. But they must be a terrible judge of character to abduct her."

Diana remained silent, but her expression did loosen a bit.

The ends of her eyebrows lowered and she nodded once.

"I have no children, so I don't really understand."

"That's fine. I'm sure there's a part of it that any woman would understand." Tsukuyomi gave a bitter smile in return. "Her bag and coat were found at the site the flying object fell last night. She was probably accidentally taken inside the concept space, but…"

"…"

"Don't give me that look. It's fine. That girl won't die so easily. After all that idiot has done to disobey me and do what she wants, she'll manage on her own."

"I see she is worrying you."

"Let's just leave it at that."

Tsukuyomi's bitter smile deepened and Diana nodded.

At that point, a new female voice reached them.

"I am not sure you two should be speaking about 3rd-Gear so openly."

Diana recognized the voice.

“Sf?”

She tilted her head, looked around, and spotted Sf.

She was standing sideways in the small gap between vending machines.

“U-um, Sf? Did you gain some strange habits when formatted for the Japanese language? Why are you crammed in that small space?”

“Tes. Monitoring Itaru-sama at all times is one of my duties, but he moved out of range of my senses. I have determined he is viewing the sky from a corner of the roof.”

“And that spot is just barely within range?”

“Tes. I have determined it was a dangerous situation. I was on my way back from disposing of some trash at the underground incinerator, and I would have lost him for the first time if I had been just a little slower.”

Tsukuyomi looked back and forth between Sf in between the vending machines and Diana next to her.

“So this is what they call German quality.”

“Th-this is because of the local formatting.”

Diana waved her hands in denial and glanced over at Sf.

“Should I go and tell Itaru to move from the roof?”

“Tes. However, that will not be necessary. Statistically, he never continues any one task for long, so I have determined he will return to his office soon. I will remain on standby here until then. His irregular action here is most likely due to him thinking about the coming Leviathan Road.”

“It is true he used to always go outside while thinking.”

Diana’s comment caused Sf to tilt her head between the vending machines.

“That information is worth adding to my records.”

"You didn't know that? When we had all reached various dead ends, I was often dragged outside. Both by him and someone else I know quite well."

"Who is that?" asked Tsukuyomi, but Diana only smiled weakly back.

"If you always choose to continue on, you will eventually arrive somewhere. You remember that too, Sf. And do not leave Itaru alone again."

"Tes. I will make sure to never again leave him while he is thinking."

Sf bowed from between the vending machines.

"My ability to wait is infinite, but I will never allow myself to leave him."

The sun rose high into the sky.

Several large buildings were lined up below the sunlight.

The buildings all belonged to a school. The sunlight covered a large campus and students in summer uniforms walked between the buildings.

Most of the students were headed to the dormitories or their club activities. Some held graded tests in their hands.

Among them all, a few people sat in front of a school building in the center of the campus.

Four students sat on the lawn in front of the library protruding from the school building. Three wore male uniforms and one wore a female uniform.

They were Sayama, Shinjou, Izumo, and Kazami.

A large multi-layer bento box and a small multi-layer bento box sat between them.

With a black binder sitting next to her, Shinjou reached for the small box. She used chopsticks to grab a croquette and held it out toward Sayama to her right.

“Here, Sayama-kun. I even made the filling this time.”

Once it was put in his mouth, Sayama thoroughly chewed the croquette and swallowed it.

Shinjou looked a bit worried, so he thought for a moment and then spoke.

"Yes. A supreme flavor, Shinjou-kun."

"Wow, I'm glad. I can almost feel the horrible rumor from this morning disappearing within me."

She smiled and grabbed a new croquette.

"I used the cafeteria kitchen to cook these and this one contains some strange leaves that Old Lady Tome said make a good secret ingredient. She said they only grow on her balcony."

"Hm. I think I see why that cafeteria has so many regular customers. I would prefer not to know any more details, though."

Sayama smiled pleasantly in the sun and Shinjou's cheeks reddened slightly.

Across from them, Kazami and Izumo stared at them with half-lidded eyes.

"Even though I know the truth, it feels weird to see them flirting in male uniforms."

"I can't believe they're doing this when that rumor started only this morning."

The two tilted their heads, but Shinjou continued feeding Sayama.

As students passed by, a few girls lowered their heads toward Kazami.

"Hello, Kazami-san."

When she looked up and nodded back, they would bow again and leave.

Izumo looked impressed as she nodded in self-satisfaction.

"You sure are popular."

"Heh heh. That's because I'm the only one who can stop you and Sayama."

That was when more people greeted her. A few boys with disheveled uniforms were passing by.

"Ah… K-Kazami-san. Good morning!"

They immediately covered their faces with their crushed bags and quickly ran away.

They left only the wind behind.

After a pause, Izumo nodded expressionlessly.

"Chisato, I'll stick with you no matter what, so tell me what happened. And be honest."

"What do you mean by that? I didn't do anything *too* horrible."

"Eh?" said Shinjou. She held her nose and made a gesture of something falling from it. "Drip drip?"

"Shinjou-kun, not even cute onomatopoeia can soften this, so do not even try. Now, Kazami, about last night."

Kazami froze in place when she heard the term "last night".

After a short pause, she looked around and nodded.

"You mean about Hiba Ryuuji? Don't worry. I summoned him via his homeroom teacher, so he'll be here soon. More importantly, I assume Sibyl contacted you this morning."

She took a breath.

"You heard that Director Tsukuyomi's daughter was abducted, right?"

Shinjou looked up as she listened to Kazami.

"It happened in the battle that Hiba guy was fighting, didn't it?"

"Yes. The items left inside the concept space last night show that Director Tsukuyomi's daughter was there. And Hiba Ryuuji probably knows the truth of the matter. He was taken into UCAT custody, so he probably told them about it."

She gave a bitter smile.

"Based on Ooki-sensei's opinion and the fragment of white armor left at the scene, both Hiba Ryuuji's craft and his opponent have power on the level of a Concept Core. We can't say anything about Hiba's, but his opponent was likely Typhon. That proves that some remnants of 3rd-Gear remain. …And Sibyl also mentioned that she discussed another matter with you two."

"Yes. Sayama-kun received an additional call."

As Baku mimicked him on his head, Sayama nodded.

"Director Tsukuyomi is headed to the UCAT Kanda laboratory to receive a device needed to examine Georgius and another important item. Shinjou-kun and I will be accompanying her as witnesses of the event."

"Georgius is going to be examined? But why does Shinjou have to go too if you are only retrieving equipment?"

"Most likely to distract me from my interest in 3rd. Even if I refuse to act as witness for some reason, Shinjou-kun cannot refuse. …And thus I will go too."

"Uuh… I-it's true I can't turn down jobs people ask me to do."

"Oh, so Shinjou is the lure to get you to go."

"Kaku, don't say it like that. The term you want is 'bait '. That sounds much more normal."

"Y-you don't have to make it normal!"

Hearing that, Sayama shook his head solemnly.

"Shinjou-kun, normal is best for humans. If you ever need a model, just watch me."

"You're right. Watching you is a good way of realizing normal is best."

It was unclear if her meaning had reached him because he nodded deeply and crossed his arms.

"At any rate, 3rd-Gear's Leviathan Road has yet to start and we are already meeting a boy who is personally fighting 3rd-Gear and 3rd has abducted someone. If Japanese UCAT does not wish to provide the other UCATs with any misunderstandings or excuses to interfere…"

"…then they wouldn't want Team Leviathan to deal with anything problematic? …And then there's that impurity that Hiba mentioned last night. He said he wanted some time."

"Yes, but UCAT might be expecting us to do something. We have summoned the Hiba boy to meet us, but no one has interfered. And only Shinjou-kun and I are going to Kanda. Izumo, Kazami, that means the two of you can do as you wish."

For once, clear irritation could be heard in Sayama's voice. A hint of harshness had entered his expression as well.

Seeing that, Shinjou smiled in her heart.

…He wants to take the initiative and gather information himself.

And so she wrapped her ring-wearing right hand around his left elbow.

"Let's eat lunch."

"…Yes."

He nodded, closed his eyes for a moment, and returned to his usual expressionless look. Shinjou was worried she was forcing him to do this, but he looked her in the eye.

"Come to think of it, Kazami, don't you have something to give Shinjou-kun?"

"Eh? Kazami-san has something for me?"

What could that be? she wondered.

After a moment, she shook her hands in denial as Kazami's shoulders rose in realization.

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that! As thanks for helping me shop the other day, I bought her a raw milk gyuudon at the UCAT cafeteria, but you don't have to pay me back for that."

"Chisato, is that why you've been worried about your waistline recently?"

"N-no. I ran around the school buildings after I got back that night."

As she pled her case to Izumo, Kazami pulled an envelope form her pocket and handed it to Shinjou.

“Can I open it?” asked Shinjou as she hesitantly took it .

“What would be the point if you could not, Shinjou-kun? It is for you.”

After a moment of hesitation, she opened it.

She read through the document inside and then spoke.

“I’m being appointed as secretary of the student council?”

Surprise filled her face and a bit of heat followed.

…Wait. Is this…?

“Did I get this position through connections while ignoring the election? Hooray.”

“Shinjou-kun, choose either suspicion or excitement. Kazami, explain it to her.”

"While this is ignoring the election, the student council has the authority to appoint new members. All the lower positions starting with secretary were open this year because a lot of people pulled out of the running during the election."

"Really?"

"Yes. Last year, a certain female student performed a flying kick on a dumb yet large candidate during a speech. That led to candidates dropping out like the receding tide."

"Oh, I-I see."

"And what exactly do you mean by that?" asked Kazami with a smile.

Shinjou shrank back, but Kazami continued speaking.

"So will you accept the position? If you don't like secretary, there are plenty of other positions: general affairs director, manager, animal official, and loser. You can also decline the offer altogether."

Her question had a persuasive tone to it.

Shinjou hesitated for a moment and looked over at the black binder next to her.

…Is it worth having less time to work on this?

"Um, well… What exactly does the secretary do?"

"Well, you take notes on the proceedings of meetings. I'll interpret for Kaku, so don't worry about that."

"I get the feeling you just casually insulted my humanity," said Izumo. "In fact, I know you did."

"Ha ha ha. Before you complain about that, try writing so that a modern human can understand it, you foolish primitive," said Sayama.

"Ha ha ha. It must be nice having no humanity whatsoever and your mindset in the distant future."

"Oh, and I will handle training these inhuman people, so don't worry about that either," added Kazami. She continued as the two boys glared coldly at her. "And once you join, we can talk about the Leviathan Road

while claiming it is a student council meeting. We'll be able to reserve the library and call Ooki-sensei to join us. Sounds nice, doesn't it?"

She smiled bitterly.

"This school will be our base."

"Ah…"

With that voice of realization, Shinjou found her answer.

…It will give me ideas for my novel and help the Leviathan Road.

She felt that was looking at it too simply, but she still nodded.

"Th-then I will be the secretary."

"Are you sure, Shinjou-kun? If you join the same group as our crazy president and violent treasurer, it will start some unwanted rumors."

"Sayama-kun, I think you forget to mention someone."

"Ha ha. Of course I did. It is not right to praise oneself needlessly."

Kazami glared at him but then ignored him and looked down at her watch.

"Isn't it about time for you two to leave? Get lost, Sayama. We'll talk with Hiba and then go shopping. We need to make preparations for the training camp the day after tomorrow."

"I see."

Sayama stood up and Shinjou stood up next to him.

As she did, she suddenly saw an odd color. It was a red that resembled a flower or fresh blood.

She focused on that color that was not often seen in an outdoor lawn.

"Eyes?"

She turned around and saw a motorcycle parked on the road running alongside the yard. It had a sidecar attached and a boy sat on the motorcycle itself.

He had short hair, he wore a white bandana around his head, and he was looking their way with his red eyes.

He was Hiba Ryuuji and he had a troubled look on his face.

"Here I am. Just as you asked."

As soon as he said that, Shinjou saw Baku stir on Sayama's head.

And then the past arrived.

"…"

Shinjou found herself standing on a road surrounded on either side by green trees.

She had become nothing more than sight and hearing.

…This is the past.

She was on a mountain and the road running downhill was made of dirt. The light brown dirt was covered in tire tracks and weeds were growing up here and there.

…Where is this?

She looked around and saw manmade objects to the left and right.

They were pillars. A wooden pillar hardened with turpentine stood on either side of the road.

The fronts of the pillars were split vertically and lacquer had been poured into carved words on the smooth surface.

"Izumo Aviation Laboratory – Tokyo Branch."

That meant…

"This is the entrance to the National Defense Department!"

As she cried out with her mind, her pulse quickened.

If the National Defense Department lay ahead, there was one fact that drew her interest the greatest.

…There should be someone with my family name here.

The person had been Professor Kinugasa's assistant during the National Defense Department days, but all records of them were gone by the time UCAT came about. This person had her family name and a connection to Sayama Kaoru, Sayama's grandfather.

…And they might have some connection to my relatives.

With that thought, she tried to move her mind forward . She did not know how far the recreation of the past went, but that person might be in the National Defense Department up ahead.

"I want to see them."

That comment made her realize her thoughts.

…I am yearning.

But she had no clear answer what exactly it was for which she yearned. She could only think up immature words, but she never thought about casting aside the desire.

And so she took a step forward.

"…?"

But she stopped when she heard a noise.

Something was approaching from below the mountain behind her. She could tell it was a number of vehicles. She could hear the metallic noises of a dozen or so wheels and chassis.

…What kind of vehicles?

She turned around and saw the approaching convoy.

It was a line of green jeeps and trucks.

The flat hood of the jeep in the lead had a star mark on a white background.

This was the American military.

But Shinjou found something odd. A number of men rode that jeep, but something was off about their military uniforms. She could not quite place what was wrong with them, but she found the answer once the convoy grew closer and she could see them more clearly.

"…Ah."

It was the crest on the shoulder of their jackets.

It had a blue shield and a collection of lines surrounded by white wings.

They were UCAT.

A closer look showed that the men in the jeep and those in the trucks behind them were made up of a number of different races.

"American UCAT is leading the different UCATs of the Allies."

The convoy was approaching while acting as part of the occupying army.

…What is going on?

Shinjou knew about the origin of UCAT, but she knew nothing more than that the National Defense Department became Japanese UCAT.

She did not know the details of how it happened.

Meanwhile, the convoy approached the two pillars that formed an entrance.

She could hear their engines as they approached.

And just as it felt like they were going to run her vision over, something fell from the sky right in front of her.

It was silver-colored and shaped like a long blade.

It was a Japanese sword.

The curved blade stabbed forcefully down in front of her eyes and audibly tore at the dirt.

“!”

The elderly soldier sitting in the jeep’s passenger seat raised a hand.

In response, the convoy came to a stop. All the vehicles ’ brakes screeched, their chassis shook, and they tore up the dirt road surface.

The sounds of the dozen or so vehicles shook the leaves of the forest.

Shinjou heard the wind blow as a sudden wind arrived from behind her.

She turned around and saw motion.

It was a large green military motorcycle.

“Ha ha!”

With a laugh, the motorcycle turned sideways and slid toward Shinjou.

A short young man drove it and his short hair waved in the wind.

“So you’ve decided to show up, have you!? Are you here to steal our position? We work in the same field, don’t we!?”

As he spoke, he forcefully planted his foot in front of the sliding motorcycle.

“There we go!”

And he used that foot to rotate the motorcycle around in front of Shinjou.

The high-speed spin stopped perfectly at 180 degrees.

The young man was directly in front of the Japanese sword that had landed earlier. He now faced the convoy with the blade between them.

He supported the motorcycle with both legs and observed the convoy with his black eyes.

"You want a fight?"

He narrowed his eyes and got down from the motorcycle.

His military boots made his footsteps ring loudly from the dirt.

At the same time, everything began to move.

The people in the leading jeep and the backs of the trucks stood up. Shinjou saw a fair number of women among them.

…And those weapons.

In addition to guns, they wielded plenty of swords, spears, and shields. And unlike normal blades, they had been modified with exposed cords, components, and tanks.

The technology was still undeveloped, but those weapons had been modified with cowlings.

The elderly soldier then stepped out of the jeep's passenger seat. He held a spear.

"I ask that you surrender."

She heard the Japanese meaning of his words over the English he was actually speaking. His tone was polite yet forceful.

However, the young man's smile remained.

"I don't have a damn clue what you're saying, you old foreign bastard."

The elderly soldier's spear moved slightly.

And it produced a noise very near the handlebars of the young man's motorcycle. The single rearview mirror on the right side flew into the sky.

"I am Sail Northwind, representative of American UCAT. My north wind can pierce even steel."

"Oh, that's a neat trick." The young man's smile did not waver. "I think I've figured out what you're trying to say. This is what you're saying." He pointed at the elderly soldier's face. " 'Oh, that was a hell of an entrance ! You're pretty cool!' "

As soon as he spoke, all of those standing in the vehicles jumped down. At least a hundred armed people covered the road and forest and prepared to fight.

Countless footsteps and the metallic noises of the weapons filled the air.

But something even more impressive arrived from further down the road.

A giant form suddenly fell behind the young man and his motorcycle.

"…!!"

The form was accompanied by the sound of something extremely heavy striking the ground. The ground split and Shinjou finally saw what it was.

…A god of war.

She heard everyone gasp as a silver-colored humanoid machine stood behind the young man and his motorcycle . It was approximately eight meters tall, it resembled a female armored warrior, and it had two pairs of wings on its back.

The god of war already held a long, narrow sword in its hands.

With a mechanical noise, the wings on its back moved. They folded up to allow easier motion on the ground.

Meanwhile, the opposing soldiers could not move. They clenched their teeth and stared at the god of war behind the young man.

The spear-wielding elderly soldier's expression was the one exception. A smile remained on the corner of his mouth and he continued to look at the young man. The

young man was looking back at him with an identical expression.

Time seemed to drag on, but it suddenly came to an end.

First, the silver god of war crouched down.

Next, a slender figure appeared from its back and climbed up onto its right shoulder.

It was a woman. The young woman's blonde hair flowed across her back. As Shinjou looked at her thick eyebrows and strong-willed face, she noticed a certain color.

…*Her eyes.*

They were red. That deep scarlet below her inconspicuous eyebrows looked down at the young man.

She opened her narrow mouth as the wind whipped at her white shirt and flare skirt.

"Do not play around, Hiba."

Both her awkwardly-spoken Japanese and the name she mentioned shook Shinjou's mind.

…Hiba? As in, Hiba-sensei?

But something was off. Hiba Ryuutetsu's left eye had been colored a deep scarlet, the same as the eyes of the woman on the god of war's shoulder.

…What does that mean?

With no answer to her question, the woman continued speaking.

"Do any of you match me in power? If so, I will battle you. If not, Hiba will handle it."

"Who are you?" asked the old man who had given the name Northwind.

The young man grinned when he heard the old man's perfect Japanese.

"Oh, so you know Japanese after all."

The woman smiled bitterly.

"I am Rhea, a refugee from 3rd-Gear. And I have decided to seek refuge in Japan's National Defense Department. If you attempt to take this place from me, I will battle you whether you match me in power or not."

"…!"

The elderly soldier's smile strengthened when he heard Rhea's words.

At the same time, a black figure appeared next to Hiba. Shinjou recognized the tall man wearing a black cloak.

…Siegfried-san!

The young Siegfried calmly appeared next to Hiba as if he had grown out of the shadows of the trees. He wore black gloves and already held several pieces of paper.

When the elderly soldier saw him and the paper in his hand, he asked a smiling question.

"Siegfried Zonburg!?"

"It is a pleasure to finally meet you, Lord Northwind. Did you perhaps read the reports I sent my nation? … However, you are being too hasty here."

"It seems so, but I have learned one thing. This is the place that desires the world," said Northwind.

Hiba folded his arms and nodded.

"You've got that right. But think carefully, Old Man Northwind. The Izumo Aviation Institute's National Defense Department is working for important people right now, but if it is let loose, it will work for something else."

"And what is that exactly?"

Hiba did not answer. Instead, the woman named Rhea spoke in a dignified voice.

"That would of course be this world itself. This world has nothing and sits at the lowest level, but that is precisely why it has everything!"

Shinjou looked up just as the others were. The red-eyed woman was smiling. Instead of looking down at the people, she faced them and looked across all of them.

"I fled to this world. I abandoned my own concept to the Tartaros and came here as an individual. However, I was treated as a guest rather than a prisoner of war. There were misunderstandings and conflicts, but I now stand here as a soldier because that is my wish! I wish to fight for this world. And…"

She looked across the surrounding area. She looked at the blue sky, the trees, the earth, and the rustling wind. She left a smile in the wind and gently brought her right hand to her stomach. Only then did she look back down toward the others.

"And so that I can be with this child here. We have already begun preparing for battle. If you wish to be with us, then let us speak. But if you obstruct us in the slightest, we will be your enemy!"

"Rhea, you're sounding a lot more self-important than the rest of us. It might've been a mistake to let Kaoru prepare your Japanese lessons."

"Ha ha. You men are always so slow. When preparing to be a mother, a woman wants immediate decisions. If you do not like it, then bring me something sour to eat. …Soldiers, give your answer."

There was a clear smile in her voice.

"Do any of you wish to be the ally of my child!?"

That booming question signaled the end of the past.

As her sight and hearing rapidly fell into darkness, Shinjou thought about Rhea's words.

…Her…child?

That had been sixty years before, so where was that child now if it had been born?

Shinjou had been in UCAT the longest of the group, but she had never heard about a descendent of 3rd-Gear. She had only ever heard that 3rd-Gear was the Gear of gods of war and automatons.

"Come to think of it, this is the first time I've heard it mentioned that there were people there."

She wondered if Sayama was right and the Gear had few people, but she had no way of knowing. She

assumed that would be one thing she would learn later. If she stayed with Sayama and the others, she would learn that along with how they were destroyed.

But, she thought. *What if a descendent of hers is still alive?*

Just like Shinjou, they would have no other members of their race and not know their parents.

"I wonder if they feel lost too…"

Shinjou awoke from the past.

"…"

She took a breath and focused on the scene before her eyes.

Standing on the yard around her were Izumo, Kazami, Sayama, and Hiba.

Further away, a lot of students were returning from school and only a few seconds of time had passed.

She let out a breath and looked around. The scenery was the same. Kazami and Izumo were exchanging a dazed look, but Sayama had experienced the past several times before.

“So that is one connection between Hiba-sensei and 3rd-Gear.”

He placed a hand on his chest, took a breath, and faced Hiba.

“I see there was a refugee from 3rd-Gear.”

“Yes. That was the first time I’ve seen something like that, though.”

Hiba’s face was pale as he sat on his motorcycle. He nodded weakly and stepped to the ground. He approached but stopped with a step still separating them .

“What was that?”

Sayama grabbed Baku from his shoulder and held the creature up.

Baku looked to the left and right but suddenly hung its head and began to sleep when it noticed everyone focusing on it.

Sayama nodded deeply.

"I am sure you understand now."

"I don't understand at all!"

"Then let me put it simply. Listen and be amazed. Are you ready? Baku here can show people the past."

"Oh, I see. …I-I mean, wow! That is amazing! I'm shocked!"

You could make it less obvious, thought Shinjou as she stared at him, but Sayama nodded in satisfaction.

"Hiba-sensei was quite young, but he looked somehow like you, Hiba boy."

"Are you implying I'll look like him when I grow old? "

Shinjou nodded and tapped on Sayama's shoulder.

"You should give up now. The more I hear about Sayama-kun's grandfather, the more they sound alike."

"Shinjou-kun! That is an incredibly rude assertion. How am I anything like that self-centered old man who did nothing but eloquently mock others?"

Everyone fell silent at that.

Amid the silence, Sayama nodded, smiled toward Shinjou, and slowly spread his arms.

"Just look. Everyone is using their silence to show their agreement."

"I'll just jump to the conclusion: you need to go to the hospital."

Before Sayama could reply, she turned to Hiba and he seemed to pick up on her intent.

"U-um, anyway."

He frantically looked across the group.

Shinjou observed his expression. He looked frantic and his eyebrows were slightly lowered, so it seemed he was unsure whether he should say something or not.

She tilted her head toward that expression that she herself had often made until recently. She also lowered the ends of her eyebrows.

“There’s something you want to say, isn’t there?”

“Eh? Oh, yes. I hear you all are doing something called the Leviathan Road.”

“What about it? Do you wish to ask us to stop the Leviathan Road with 3rd-Gear?”

“Yes. This is a request from the one whose grandfather destroyed 3rd-Gear.”

His immediate response came with the relief of having said it.

Shinjou and the others judged his meaning and remained silent for a moment.

But then…

"W-wait a minute. Isn't a bit sudden to just say your grandfather destroyed 3rd-Gear?"

Shinjou understood why Kazami was so hurriedly stopping him. They wanted to know what he had meant the night before.

…So we need to take this slowly.

Shinjou sat up a bit and spoke.

"Ryuuji-kun… Yeah, I'll call you that to differentiate you from Hiba-sensei. Anyway, you're from this Gear, right? So why are you stopping us from negotiating with 3rd-Gear?"

Sayama nodded and added to her question.

"We can discuss Hiba-sensei's countless wrongdoings at a later date, but your mention of an impurity suggests a larger reason. Based on the situation from last night, you have an automaton, your grandfather belonged to the National Defense Department, and yet you are fighting Typhon without the help of UCAT."

Hiba's expression changed at the mention of the name Typhon.

He frowned a bit, so Sayama expressionlessly continued.

"And UCAT has officially told us not to get involved with you. In other words, getting involved in your fight would be a negative for us. Have you come here to tell us why that is, Hiba boy?"

"Y-yes. It is a long story and I am not sure what conclusion you all will reach, but this is what I know for sure," said Hiba. "If you carry out the Leviathan Road with 3rd-Gear and bring them to your side, it will sully the name of the Leviathan Road."

"Sully?" asked Kazami.

Hiba nodded.

"There are actually two impurities we must purify. I came here to tell you about one of them."

"This all sounds very pretentious."

"I know what you mean. But…even though I intend to bear these impurities, I do not know what will happen once I truly face them."

"In other words, you're testing us, aren't you? You're going to tell us about a lighter impurity to see if we are prepared to face the true impurity." Kazami smiled bitterly. "You're underestimating us."

But Hiba only smiled bitterly in return.

Seeing his smile, Kazami thought.

…A bitter smile, hm?

The smile he gave could only be made by one who had thought the same thing countless times. It was the smile of someone who had no other choice.

She wanted to hear him out and speak with him, but some of them had other things to do.

"Hey," she said and showed her watch to Sayama.

He nodded.

"Hiba boy, I apologize, but I must ask that you give your test to Kazami and Izumo. Shinjou-kun and I already have plans."

"And those plans are more important than speaking with me?"

"Is speaking with me more important than speaking with Izumo and Kazami? That extreme violence couple has been involved with the Leviathan Road longer than me."

"Oh, I-I see. Sorry."

Hiba frantically bowed.

Kazami smiled bitterly and Izumo solemnly folded his arms and nodded.

"Look, Sayama. Underclassmen these days are so polite."

"Hiba boy, courtesy is an expendable good. Choose wisely who you use it on. For example, you could use it all on me."

"Oh…"

Hiba did not seem to know what to say, so Shinjou turned a forced smile toward him.

"D-don't worry too much about what they say. They're all very strange."

"Oh, I-I see…"

His gaze stopped on Shinjou's arm.

Kazami then realized that Shinjou had her arm wrapped around Sayama's.

"Oh, how passionate."

"Eh? Ah! Wah! Th-this is just…"

"Ha ha ha. Shinjou-kun, why are you blushing? The opinions of those who do not know the truth about us are irrelevant."

"Stop saying things that will only confuse this further!!"

Hiba tried to back away from them as he stared at them with half-lidded eyes.

…What is he doing?

Kazami stood up and tapped him on the shoulder. With an exasperated smile, she spread her arms.

"Do you understand now who the most wholesome and normal of us is?"

"…Using the process of elimination?"

"What was that?"

"Nothing, nothing."

He shook his head just as someone else cut in.

"Wait a minute, Hiba."

Izumo suddenly stood up and Kazami saw him look Hiba in the eye.

"How about we continue our talk in the Kinugasa Library? You want to test us, right?"

"Yes, sorry."

"No need to apologize. I'll be testing you, too. I want to see what kind of person you are."

"Eh?"

Hiba tilted his head and took a light defensive stance.

With his arms crossed, Izumo stepped forward. Izumo was approximately 190 centimeters while Hiba looked about 160. Kazami thought Izumo was going to use that difference in height in some way, but he instead opened his mouth to speak.

"The test is simple, Hiba. I have one question about the past we were just shown. …Did you see it?"

Izumo glanced to the side a bit as he spoke and the look on Hiba's face changed. A sharpness filled his eyes.

But he finally frantically shook his head.

"I-I didn't see anything. …What is the point of this sudden test?"

Hiba's arms were spread as if it had started raining.

…He definitely saw something.

Izumo continued speaking as if he understood what Kazami was thinking. He patted Hiba's shoulder and looked him in the eye again.

"You saw the same thing in the past as I did, didn't you?"

"N-no. I didn't see anything."

"No, you had to have seen them from below. At least a glimpse. They were blue, weren't they!?"

"No, they were white! I happened to get a good look!"

Hiba's reflexive response caused everyone to freeze in place.

Wind blew through the silence that lasted a few seconds.

"…Ah."

As Hiba realized his mistake, Izumo nodded several times in understanding.

He folded his arms and spoke in a serious tone of voice.

"You have a promising future. I hope you can diligently-…"

Kazami swung her right leg and Izumo vanished.

After a short pause, she heard the sound of a human-sized object hitting the wall to the left, but she paid it no heed. She was used to this.

"Now then."

She looked at the others who turned toward her after looking to the left.

She saw Baku staring rigidly at her from Sayama's shoulder.

…This is the first time he has looked me in the eye.

That made her happy, but she had something to say.

"Next time you want to show us a past with a girl or woman in it, do it when Kaku isn't around, okay?"

The smile on her face made Baku frantically nod repeatedly.

"Good boy."

When she reached out to pet the creature, it fluffed up its fur and let her.

Shinjou gave a stiff smile from next to Sayama.

"C-come to think of it, this is the first time you've petted Baku, Kazami-san. Isn't that nice?"

"Heh heh. I guess it's true that animals can sense people's emotions. I'm very calm right now. So calm I feel a strong urge to do this."

Sayama seemed to have chosen not to comment, so she took Baku from his shoulder and held the creature to her chest.

Shinjou frantically took Sayama's arm and looked back and forth between Hiba and Kazami.

"Um…what do we do now? Th-that leaves Kazami-san to handle Ryuuji-kun."

"Eh? Ehh? Sh-she'll break me!"

"Heh heh heh. Don't be so shy, freshman. Don't worry . It doesn't hurt that much."

With the same smile as before, Kazami cracked the knuckles of her right hand and faced Sayama.

"You two can leave now. I will handle this interrogation…I mean forced information extraction…no, that isn't it either. Um… How should I put it?" She nodded once toward Hiba. "I'll have you tell me everything about this test, the impurity, and everything else. How about that?"

With all the hair on his body standing on end, Hiba nodded repeatedly.

Sunlight filled a hallway.

A tall maid walked through the hallway. She was Moira 1st who had spoken with Tsukuyomi Miyako.

She was pushing an ornamented metal stretcher. The table-like surface contained silver plates with semispherical lids.

Outside of the hallway's windows were a forest, a slope, and a city. The city was packed with small buildings and houses. She glanced over at them and narrowed her eyes.

"The princess will not remember us once she returns there."

"That isn't necessarily true," immediately replied a fairly low female voice.

Moira 1st slowly turned around and saw two people standing by the wall behind her. One was a tall woman in a red suit and the other was a large man wearing a T-shirt, jeans, and a blue apron. Moira 1st looked at the two of them.

"Mistress Gyes and Master Aigaion. Are you working, Master Aigaion?"

The large man named Aigaion brushed up his short-cropped blond hair and looked down at his clothes.

The thick material of his blue apron said “Dragon Grocer ” in white.

“I have no other choice. I simply dropped by while out on delivery because I heard the princess had woken up.”

“I told you to stay away because your huge body only gets in the way.”

Gyes, the woman with short black hair, shook her head.

“But Cottus is bragging about being the first to see this princess,” said Aigaion. “After all, his position down there let him see her first when Typhon brought her back .”

“Moira 1st, why did Typhon abduct that woman?”

Moira 1st tilted her head.

“According to the maintenance maids, there was an intense scorch mark on Typhon’s back. It apparently came from Keravnos.”

“So it ran across that black god of war. Does that mean it took a hostage in the shock of the initial strike?”

"Most likely," said Moira 1st.

Suddenly, a new male voice cut in.

"Are you three Hecatoncheires interested in her?"

The voice came from the wall even further down the hallway. A young man leaned weakly against it.

He wore white clothes and had long, blond hair. Moira 1st faced him and raised her eyebrows.

"Lord Apollo, should you really be up?"

"With all the noise out here, it sounded more interesting than the bed or garden."

He got up from the wall and moved his yellow eyes.

He turned a weak smile toward the plates Moira 1st was transporting.

"Has she woken up?"

"She is quite energetic, Lord Apollo."

Gyes twisted her head at Moira 1st's informative tone.

"It might be feigned. All the others who wandered here were like that."

As soon as she finished speaking, her expression changed.

The harshness left her face and she let out a regretful sigh.

"Sorry. I know this is a rare pleasure for you."

"There is no need to apologize. What you said is true. But…" Moira 1st tilted her head as she chose her words. "To put it bluntly, she broke through the memory manipulation that Moira 3rd so delightedly applied."

"It is not that unlikely a turn of events. If the memories you sealed or the story Moira 3rd told included something important to her, she would naturally reject them. Then the seal and the story would vanish, correct? "

"Yes, but the seal is still in place. The new princess believes those memories are missing. Perhaps we should have given more thought to Moira 3rd's story."

"What story did Moira 3rd tell? The princess was taken here from the eastern side of this country. No normal artificial memory would form a proper connection."

"Yes." Moira 1st nodded with a serious expression. "It was simple. The train the princess was riding from a station called Shinjuku was abducted by a flying saucer and all the people aboard were given physical examinations by aliens. After having her sitting height erroneously measured too high, the princess angrily punched the little greys until she had taken control of the bridge. She then shouted 'take me to Hawaii!', but the flying saucer underwent a Dutch roll and crashed in Okayama! The title is 'The Naked Princess in Space: To Terra'."

"Sounds exciting, but there's no heroine."

"In this case, the protagonist of the princess doubles as a powerful heroine. A meaningless shower scene partway through where she only washes her shoulders is a must. I have studied this with the limited resources available to me."

"I see."

Aigaion and Apollo folded their arms and nodded, but Gyes frowned doubtfully.

"At any rate, the fruit of your studies was rejected. … Are you going to try a second story?"

Moira 1st lowered her head but finally answered.

"I think it would be difficult. Moira 3rd's stories are meant to be placed over the memories I seal, but there should be a half-erased blank there now. If we forcibly attempt to change the story…"

"It could apply pressure to her memories until they break, destroying her personality. …Humans are difficult to deal with." Having said that, Gyes frantically turned toward Apollo. "My apologies. I was not trying to say that you are difficult to deal with."

"But I am. I don't do anything and I'm no use whatsoever."

Gyes fell silent and Aigaion elbowed her in the side.

Moira 1st smiled bitterly as she looked at the two and then at Apollo.

"In other words, you are sensitive."

"Yes, exactly. Well said, Moira 1st. Now, Lord Apollo, Moira 2nd says you have been in good health recently, so will you go outside today?"

"Are the dolls worried for their master? …But I do think I will wander around outside for a bit."

Apollo smiled bitterly just as a maid arrived from down the hallway. Moira 1st saw her jog toward them.

"Do not run in the hallway, 43rd. Now, what is it?"

The maid named 43rd nodded and got down on one knee in front of Moira 1st.

"I apologize. But…the princess has escaped!"

"Escaped?" asked Gyes rather than Moira 1st.

The maid nodded and pulled a piece of cloth from her chest. It was a pillowcase with thick letters written using something brown.

"This was written with the chocolate Moira 3rd gave her."

Moira 1st read it, let out a laugh, and then turned to Gyes.

“It says ‘Thanks for your hospitality’.”

“You sound happy, Moira 1st. Did you know this would happen?”

“No.” Moira 1st tilted her head and spoke to Gyes, who looked suspicious, and the two men, who looked a bit surprised. “But if you recall, I did say she was energetic.”

Chapter 3: Scent of Light

Chapter 3

“Scent of Light”

The moon and those eyes cannot be seen
But their presence can be felt
As if they are blooming high in the sky

The moon and those eyes cannot be seen

But their presence can be felt

As if they are blooming high in the sky

Miyako ran down a wide hallway.

She wore a white sheet tied around her shoulders and waist. Her outfit could not have been any lighter.

…But this does make it easier to run.

However, a certain thought came to her as she ran down the white-walled and red-carpeted hallway.

"I need to quit smoking!"

She ran out of breath quickly.

Back when she had been a delinquent, she had been the master of chasing or being chased all night long, but she finally realized how much she had deteriorated.

She wanted to make her way downstairs. She had seen some kind of city out of the previous room's window.

This seemed to be a facility in a mountain forest. The room had looked to be on the eighth floor and she was not sure if there were any higher floors.

…But what kind of facility is this?

Was it a large local corporation?

The white hallway had no windows, a width of about four meters wide, and not a speck of dust. It also continued for quite a while.

As she ran, she recalled the city she had seen outside. It had small-scale buildings along with an older-style cityscape.

This was likely an area with some history to it.

The few larger buildings in the distance had to have been the train station or hotels. But she had not seen the marks left by the type of rezoning Nara or Kyoto had gone through and it had not had the green of Kanazawa.

"But it looked somehow familiar."

Wondering where she had seen it before, she tilted her head while running. Meanwhile, she heard footsteps from the other direction.

She turned a corner to wait out whoever was coming by. As she did, several maids rushed by at the T-junction up ahead. She pressed against the wall and took a breath.

…It would be too dangerous to head out now.

Her weak imagination then went wild wondering what would happen to her if she were captured by the kind of perverted corporation that would create a maid facility like this.

For a moment, she imagined herself having been transformed into a maid. In her head, she was sitting with one knee on the floor and smoking a cigarette.

"Keh."

She clicked her tongue once, looked to the wall, and saw a few picture frames.

"…?"

There were three and they all contained portraits. They were oil paintings rather than photographs.

The left painting showed a gray-haired old man. The center one showed a well-built slightly less old man with blond hair and a beard. The right one showed a young woman with long blonde hair and a slender face.

She assumed these were the owners of the building.

…So they really are foreigners?

She looked the smiling woman's portrait in her pale blue eyes and tilted her head.

"Hm?"

Miyako realized something was lightly tapping her left leg from below.

There was something there.

That fact and her own carelessness made her heart skip a beat.

She immediately glanced to the left and lowered down defensively.

"…A water fountain?"

It looked like the button-operated water fountains seen in the corner of a school cafeteria.

…Those things that won't give you enough water but won't stop shooting it into the air after you hit it a few times.

One of those was there.

The white and brown device was looking up at her from waist height.

It was staring silently.

…Looking…up at me?

As her own thought made her tilt her head, Miyako stared at the machine while standing in front of the frames on the wall.

And the water fountain gently twisted its metal body to tilt itself to match the tilt of her head.

"…?"

Something was not right. But what?

…No, it's obvious what isn't right here. It's just on such a huge scale that I didn't realize it at first.

As she thought, she reached out to confirm the truth she had been ignoring.

The machine moved toward her hand and let her touch it. Its metal body bent so it could rub up against her just like a dog.

"It wants me to pet it?"

While muttering her thoughts as a question, she crouched down and slowly touched the machine with both hands.

The machine happily and gently swung its body back and forth. If it had had a tail, this motion would have been wagging that tail. She rubbed over its entire body to make sure it was made out of a metallic material.

…It's a machine.

She took a step back while still crouched down.

And the machine bent its bottom installation parts to approach using an extending and contracting motion.

As the water fountain rubbed up against her again, it happily tilted its body.

“Is this a prototype of some new tech?” she muttered with a hand on her chin.

She tried petting the water fountains head and it pressed its head against her hand.

It sure is friendly, she thought while pressing the water fountain’s button to see what happened.

Water came from the top edge. She touched it and found it was nothing more than cold water.

The water fountain stayed perfectly still so that the water would not spill and it waited for her to drink it.

And so she tried drinking the water.

“…”

It was normal. It was quite cold and it felt good on her throat after running.

But…

"Thanks."

She petted the machine's head again and it bowed.

After happily shaking its body again, the water fountain turned around and ran off while extending and contracting its legs.

Miyako stood up and tilted her head.

…What was with that machine?

It was metal, but it had seemed alive.

"…!"

Suddenly, something moved in her head. Or at least, she felt like something did.

…Eh?

There was something she had forgotten and could not remember.

It was a memory. She tried to remember, but for some reason, it would not come to her.

She felt a thick fog of forgetfulness.

She did not know what she had tried to remember from the thought that metal had been alive.

But she realized something. That memory came from the previous night. After failing her job interview, going drinking, and heading back, she had started on the road home from Ikusabata Station.

"…"

She leaned against the wall, placed a hand on her head , and thought.

…What was it…?

She felt something on the verge of appearing from the depths of her memories.

"Ah."

For some reason, an image of herself striking a gray alien with an iron fist entered her head.

She strengthened the strike with the motion of her waist to defeat the little grey.

After one, two, and then three solid hits, the little grey began to tap on the ground to beg forgiveness.

"That isn't it. …What is with that B-grade memory, anyway?"

She ignored the strange image and realized there was a lid.

That lid was sealing her memories. She felt as if her true self was shouting at her from beyond the lid. She wondered if a version of herself that understood everything lay there.

…I need something.

She needed something that would act as a key to open the lid.

And just as she nodded…

"Ah! I found her! She is in front of Lord Zeus's portrait !"

Three maids appeared from the T-junction up ahead.

Miyako clicked her tongue and turned her head. In an instant, she observed that the approaching maids were positioned to the right, left, and right.

She had gotten some water, caught her breath, and wanted to learn the truth of her memories.

Nothing pointed to her loss.

And so she prepared herself. She stood on the central line and took on each of the maids in turn.

The first maid on the right was unarmed, the second one on the left held a broom, and the third one was also unarmed.

They likely planned to have the first one stop her with a tackle, the second one use the broom handle to hold her in check or strike her, and the third one restrain her.

Miyako first took a large step backwards.

“Wait!”

With that shout, the maids began to run faster.

However, Miyako leaped backwards while still facing them.

While back stepping further, she partially matched her speed to the first blonde girl.

The maid opened her mouth, wrinkled her brow, and shouted out a question.

“Why are you trying to escape from us!?”

For an instant, Miyako did not know what she meant.

…It almost sounds like she doesn’t want me to leave them.

Suddenly, Miyako recalled something from a very long time ago.

One night, she had clung to the side of a man in a work uniform as that man had tried to go somewhere. She had still been a child and she had not been satisfied just with having her head rubbed.

She knew what it was like to not want someone to leave.

Despite recalling those feeling from ten years before, she replied while continuing to move backwards.

“I refuse to accept the situation I’m in right now!”

The maid did not reply. She only moved forward with an expression saying she would capture Miyako.

The maid approached quite close and her right arm reached for Miyako’s chest.

Just as the maid’s arm was about to reach her, Miyako suddenly took action.

She slowed down her back stepping.

The maid gave a look of surprise as the change in relative speed caused them to suddenly approach.

In an instant, Miyako brushed the girl's outstretched arm upwards.

"Ah."

And Miyako shoved her body against the maid's open side.

She gave a light tackle by pressing her shoulder into the maid's side and she grabbed the maid's slender body. She used the maid's approaching momentum to lift her up onto her shoulder and used her back muscles to bend the maid backwards.

"!"

And she began back stepping once more.

As the girl on her shoulder gasped, she rotated to the right.

She rotated on one tiptoe.

"Left!"

And she threw the maid on her back toward the broom-wielding maid to the left.

For an instant, the broom-wielding maid stared blankly at the body thrown toward her.

And so Miyako shouted out.

“Catch her!”

“Oh, yes!”

The broom-wielding maid threw aside the broom just as Miyako finished her rotation.

She now faced the direction of the maids which was the direction she had originally needed to go.

And thus her back stepping came to an end and she could begin running forward.

She poured all of her backwards-moving momentum into the soles of her feet. She moved forward. She tilted forward as if trying to press her chest to the floor, she kicked off the floor, and she ran full speed from the very first step.

She ran as if flying.

To her left, she saw that the maid who had abandoned her broom had caught the thrown blonde. She immediately passed by them, but the blonde maid and the previously broom-wielding maid could not move quickly enough.

Two down.

Miyako faced the final one.

But that maid was watching her movements carefully. The third maid had black hair and she had stopped to prepare herself.

…A good decision!

Miyako continued forward without stopping and she reached for something in the air.

It was the broom the second maid had thrown aside.

She used the fingers of her right hand to spin it around and swung it. The end of the brush scraped against the white wall.

"Outta the way! Outta the way! Outta the way!"

Her shout caused her opponent to flinch.

But this final maid did not move out of the way. She seemed to have made some form of decision because she held out her white gloved hands as the broom approached her.

She intended to stop it and take her next action.

That pose says she's confident she can stop it, thought Miyako. *These are nice girls.*

A smile appeared on the corner of her mouth.

…If I had a bunch of people like this on my side, I could conquer at least Kantou.

With that thought, she swung the broom down toward the maid's head.

In response, the black-haired maid lowered her hips in a defensive stance.

And…

"You can have this. I'm terrible at cleaning."

Miyako tossed the broom forward.

The maid watched the broom handle floating before her eyes.

“Eh?”

As the handle slowly moved toward her, she reflexively reached out toward it.

And that signaled the end of the game. Miyako immediately slipped past her side. She accelerated much faster than before. Before the maid could turn around in sudden realization, she had already accelerated away.

Miyako made her way past the maid all at once.

Not even the maid’s gaze could keep up as she left through the T-junction. She turned right because she was closer to that end of the building.

She turned her head at the same time as lowering her hips. She took the step at the same time as throwing herself to the right.

The right hallway was empty and the air seemed to be telling her to continue on.

She felt a wind. Rather than the air of a stuffy room, this chilly wind came from outside.

As she ran and swung her arms, she started to think again.

…What is that memory? What is that memory from last night that I can't remember?

It was faint, but she felt as if she was beginning to remember something.

As she wondered what it was, something appeared in her mind.

"A color?"

In an instant, the keyword of "night" caused the pale moon to flash into her mind. The night before, she had to have seen a nearly full moon.

…But that isn't it.

The color that occasionally appeared in her mind was not the pale blue of the moonlight.

Just as she wondered what it was, she saw the color.

Ahead of her was an emergency exit that was sitting open to air out the hallway. Through that open door, she saw the outside light. She saw the color of the yellow sunlight.

"!"

That was it.

That was the color she wanted to see and the color from her fragmented memories. But what meaning did that color have?

Her memories were from the night before, so where had she seen sunlight?

With that question in mind, she continued to run. She headed for the emergency exit rather than the staircase.

At the same time, a small figure came up the internal stairs to the right of the emergency exit.

It was Moira 3rd. She seemed to be trying to stop Miyako as well. She held forward her white gloved hands as she ran up the stairs.

On the other hand, Miyako paid the girl no heed. Before the short and young maid's hands could reach her , she arrived at the emergency exit. Or she should have.

"Wham!!"

Miyako heard Moira 3rd's delighted shout and then felt something strike her from down and to the right.

…What?

It felt like a mass of water struck the lower right of her body, but her surprise was even greater than the impact.

After all, Moira 3rd had yet to fully climb the stairs and was too far away to reach her.

Before she could wonder what had happened, all of the different forces involved produced a certain result.

She flew through the emergency exit and into the air at eight stories above the ground.

As Miyako flew over the fence around the emergency exit's elevator and into the air, the first thing she saw was the sky.

Her vision was pointed upwards. Ahead of her, she saw the color blue and some clouds.

It's so vast, she thought as her vision bent further backwards and brought the city into view.

It was a flat city. The only high ground was the mountain this building sat on. Everything else was just a dense collection of buildings and homes on a flat land. She also saw a Shinto shrine on the opposite side of the mountain.

The sense of familiarity the city gave her caused her to focus on one point.

An L-shaped area on the southern end of the city looked old. And it looked somehow artificially old. Amid the lines of white walls and tile roofs, she saw some of the Western architecture she had seen in text books.

…Is that Kurashiki?

She had gone there on a field trip during high school. That old part of the city was the Bikan historical district. In that case, the one huge building there would be the art museum. She had gone there only a few years before, but she did not remember much besides buying a horseshoe crab shell as a souvenir.

"But that's probably where this is."

Suddenly, the movement of her vision stopped.

She had reached the peak of her arc. She would now fall.

Strength quickly left her body and she felt as if something were tugging her back downwards.

…Am I about to die?

With that lighthearted thought, all strength vanished from her body.

She recalled many different things. She recalled the past and her hidden memories.

She first remembered an incident from elementary school. She had been playing baseball with a paper ball

and the cloth case containing her recorder. She had completely missed with her swing, the recorder had come apart in the case, and the mouthpiece had flown out. The mouthpiece had struck the pitcher's forehead and created a crescent moon-shaped injury. The pitcher had naturally been taken to the hospital.

She remembered another incident from when she had started noticing the opposite sex during middle school. She had grown fond of a certain upperclassman on the baseball team, so she had been watching him practice. When a ball had rolled up to her feet, she had thrown it back in her own type of girl's throw, but it had gotten lost in the light of the sun. As soon as the upperclassman had looked down, it had fallen right on top of the hard, button-like ball on the top of his baseball cap. As blood had flowed from underneath his cap, he had fallen to his knees and then collapsed to the ground.

"These are all terrible memories!"

She came back to her senses and flailed her limbs around, but her hands only reached empty air.

She looked around in hopes of finding something to grab onto.

With her vision pointed upwards, she looked to the city and then back at the building.

It was a giant white building made of stone.

The stone building had been polished until it reflected light like glass. It had a giant warehouse-like metal door that stretched from the ground to about the sixth story. Above that were four stories of living space. The living space had a shallow triangular roof which gave the entire building a certain shape.

"It looks like a temple."

That thought was immediately followed by a sudden impact across her entire body.

"!"

This was much too soon to be the ground. Her midair surprise was caused by the impact of landing on her butt, back, and legs. However, the surface continued to descend so as to absorb the impact.

As she wondered what was happening, she forced her numb body to sit up. She stopped moving and saw what lay below her butt.

"A hand?"

It was shaped like a hand, but it was much larger. A human hand would certainly not be a meter across. It would also not be colored blue or be made of a hard plastic-like material.

"What is this?"

With an odd sense of déjà vu, she turned toward the blue hand's wrist.

The temple-like door was open and a blue arm was sticking out at a height of about three meters above the ground.

The owner of the arm exited through the door.

It was a giant warrior wearing blue armor.

It was about ten meters tall. The joints of its giant arm were all coated with a plastic-like substance, but she could not sense the pulsation of a living creature.

And so she reached the following conclusion about the giant supporting her.

"A robot? What is this, an anime?"

As she muttered to herself, she looked at its face. Its facial structure was made from a collection of metal and the lights in place of its eyes were green and continued to blink faintly.

As she looked at the color of the warrior's eyes, a certain thought came to her.

…This isn't it.

But she did not know what that thought meant.

"…"

She then saw something behind the blue armored warrior.

A giant white armored warrior sat inside what looked like a hangar.

It was a size larger than the blue giant and it stood straight in the supporting hangar. Bluish-white writing appeared in a dark oblong hole on the side of the hangar.

She had never seen that type of writing before, so she could only tell that it was the writing of some other culture. However, she could tell what it said. The side of the hangar said "Typhon".

She did not know what the word meant, but she understood that it was the name of the white giant.

That was when a memory returned to her.

"Last night."

For an instant, those hidden memories of the past revived within her.

First, she remembered herself.

…I screwed up the interview and…

After leaving Ikusabata Station, she had complained on the gravel road through the paddy field.

"And then I was caught in the middle of a fight involving this anime robot thing."

As she replayed her memories, she took a certain action.

She looked upwards.

"!"

While ignoring how it was messing up her hair, she looked into the blue sky and saw a certain light in the center.

It was the light of the sun.

That warm light wrapped in the color yellow brought back another memory. Last night, the white giant had descended before her and she had seen the color of its eyes.

…And I felt something then.

What had it been?

She did not know.

But the rapid refrain of memories left her sitting blankly on the giant hand.

She had also been saved from falling, so her tension lessened and she merely sat motionlessly.

In response, the blue arm started lowering. It was a slow and gentle motion meant to keep her from harm.

"…Ah."

She looked down.

A large crowd had gathered there. They were all maids.

Moira 1st was there, Moira 3rd was there, and a maid with short hair of the same color was the only one looking away from her. That may have been Moira 2nd.

All of the other maids there were looking up at her with looks of relief.

…And looks of expectation.

It looked like they thought her rescue meant that something enjoyable would continue.

Miyako sighed at the looks on their faces.

…Why are they looking that way toward someone like me?

Chapter 4: Greeting at the Entrance

Chapter 4

“Greeting at the Entrance”

A world full of questions lies there
Is that place desired?
Or does it desire?

A world full of questions lies there

Is that place desired?

Or does it desire?

Even at the beginning of summer, the afternoon mountain wind was chilly.

That pure wind did not shake or bend and it was not a mountain or a river that it washed over.

It covered a high place. Specifically, it covered the rooftop of Japanese UCAT's transportation administration building which was built in the mountains of Okutama.

Currently, a single figure stood on the edge of the rooftop.

The figure in a black suit paid no heed to the early summer sunlight and let the wind blow through his white hair.

As he looked down through his sunglasses, he saw nothing but a long runway and the road leaving UCAT.

He looked into the distance to the east and he saw nothing on the road next to the runway or the valley road dividing this area from IAI grounds.

“They’ve gone.”

After muttering expressionlessly, he heard a female voice from below.

“Oh, dear. Itaru, are you seeing the princess and prince off?”

“Leave, German witch.”

His immediate response was followed by a figure rising from the edge of the roof. She was standing on the outer wall.

The woman wore a black suit as she walked up the wall and then stepped onto the edge of the roof. Her long , soft, and ashen hair blew in the wind.

“Diana, why are you here? And use the emergency exit like a normal person.”

"You seemed to be lost in thought, so I was hiding in case you said something embarrassingly sentimental. If I used the emergency exit, the creaking of the door would have given me away."

"Oh? And did I say anything strange, newt woman?"

"A gecko would be better luck."[1]

Diana smiled and lightly spun around on the edge of the roof.

"Itaru, you said quite a lot. Most of which only we know about anymore."

"Is that so? I don't recall saying anything."

"You did not use words, but the voice of your will reached me," she immediately replied. Her smile deepened and she closed her eyes. "Teasing you like this really takes me back."

"Forget all about it. And get lost. It would be for your own good, Diana Zonburg." Itaru sighed. "I alone will carry all of that hopelessly pathetic, hopelessly drunk, hopelessly broken, and hopelessly dense time. You only

need to feign ignorance. If you do, it will all end without anyone knowing anything."

"So you are going to greedily keep it all to yourself? Is that because you watched it all from the sidelines without being one of the Five Great Peaks? And… because you cried and shouted out back then?"

As soon as she said that, Itaru suddenly swung his right arm horizontally.

That arm held his metal cane and it flew toward Diana 's legs.

But she evaded the strike. She lightly swung her body away from the rooftop.

And she took a step.

That was all it took for her to move off the rooftop and set foot on the building's outer wall.

She fell horizontal to the ground for an instant and then swung her body back toward the edge of the rooftop.

And when the cement floor of the rooftop came into view once more, Itaru had collapsed onto it.

“Oh, dear.” She lightly crossed her arms and smiled. “ Of course you will fall if you swing your cane. I won’t help you up, by the way. I would be too embarrassed if you saw up my skirt from below.”

“If so, German UCAT must have a philosopher’s stone treatment to prevent the aging of one’s shame as well. At any rate, get lost. My stamina is already used up for the day. I’ve had to deal with too much worthless crap and worthless people.”

“If they are so worthless, why were you seeing them off?”

Diana pulled a handkerchief from her pocket.

She spread the thin cloth decorated with a brown pattern and pushed it down with a finger. Despite the blowing wind, the cloth fell straight down without wavering and landed on the edge of the roof.

She then lightly sat on top of the handkerchief and crossed her legs.

"Well, I do understand why you would be worried about them."

"Hah. You make it sound like anyone else in the world thinks the same way you do."

"Is that so strange? For example, I find this wind to be chilly and the past to be nostalgic."

"Oh? Well, I find this wind to be annoying and the past to be unpleasant."

"That is the same thing."

"How?"

"They provide us with emotions."

Itaru fell silent and Diana sighed. Bitterness entered her smile.

"You really are fun to tease."

At that point, the emergency exit onto the roof opened and a small figure exited.

It was Sf.

Sf jogged toward Itaru through the wind and bowed toward Diana.

“Thank you for your unneeded and unnecessary consideration concerning Itaru-sama’s movement.”

“That isn’t what I was doing. I just wanted to have some fun with him.”

“Tes. Then I retract my previous statement and my thanks.”

“…”

Diana glared at Itaru and he stood up.

“Wouldn’t that be your doing, German?”

“Are you still making excuses?”

Itaru ignored her and stood up without Sf’s help. He supported his unsteady body with the metal cane and Sf held his right side to help him. Sf then turned toward Diana again.

"Were you assisting Itaru-sama in my absence?"

"No, of course not."

"Tes. I have determined that was an excellent decision. Only I, German UCAT-made Sf, am permitted to assist him. If someone else were to do so, I would be forced to repay them by assisting them in some way."

"Oh, I just remembered. I think I did indeed assist him in quite a few ways just now."

"Tes." Sf nodded. "Then I shall bring you dinner to repay you. Today's menu is flavorless miso ramen and soft crackers."

"I do not need that dinner. …Itaru, why are you looking at me with such pity?"

Sf tilted her head, looked at Diana, and then at Itaru.

"Sayama-sama, Shinjou-sama, and Director Tsukuyomi, left for the Kanda laboratory just now."

"Do you want to go? That place holds a connection to 3rd-Gear and what we could call your relatives are there."

"No, I only belong to you, Itaru-sama. I do not view myself as having any family. Also, I believe 3rd-Gear was the world of gods of war in addition to automatons."

Sf's knowledge caused Diana to clap her hands with a delighted smile.

"Well done. I see you have been learning."

"Tes. Thank you very much. As the prided machine of German UCAT, I will not forget any praise, so do not worry. I will automatically reject any complaints, though. But…"

"Your comments seem a bit disjointed. Anyway, but what?"

Sf tilted her head again.

"Tes. In all the mentions of 3rd-Gear I can remember, the discussion was about gods of war or automatons. But what about the humans? I am an automaton. I was created by people. The same goes for gods of war. They are created by people. Then where are the people of 3rd-Gear?"

Diana narrowed her eyes, rested her chin on the arm placed on her crossed leg, and looked to Itaru.

“This perception is our doing.”

“No, this comes from Japanese UCAT’s Japanese language formatting.”

“Tes. Let us settle this fairly with rock-paper-scissors. Start with rock… Why did both of you start with paper?”

As Sf watched them, the man and woman both sighed.

As their sighs ended, Itaru spoke to Sf.

“There are many different issues in the world, Sf. In a way, 3rd-Gear might be where the advancement of the modern world will lead us.”

“The advancement of the modern world?”

“You will find out soon enough. The group at Kanda will tell you that we are all powerless here.”

Itaru struck the concrete roof with the tip of his metal cane.

"And then you will understand why 3rd-Gear was destroyed so quickly."

An elevated roadway ran east to west through the center of Tokyo.

That central expressway was a long stretch of asphalt with a total of four lanes.

That large road had been constructed after the war and both cars and motorcycles travelled along it at all times.

An elevated portion just inside the city center was named Expressway #4. Below the early afternoon sun, eastbound vehicles travelled along that expressway, passed through several green or underground areas in Shinjuku, and joined the Inner Circular Route in Chiyoda .

After travelling northward on the Inner Circular Route , the vehicles quickly moved underground. Once they came back aboveground, they were north of the Imperial Palace. Travelling east between the palace and Budokan, they reached a land known as Kanda.

The vehicles exited from the expressway and entered the streets of Kanda. One of those vehicles was especially large.

It was a yellow truck. The cargo container was sealed and had a pallet at the bottom. Overall, it looked more like a crawler than a cargo truck. The side of the truck contained the IAI emblem.

The front of the truck seated four and Tsukuyomi sat in the driver's seat.

She used the rearview mirror to look at Sayama and Shinjou in the back seat. Sayama had changed into a gray suit he had left at UCAT and she looked him in the eye.

"Now, how was that drive? I told you there wouldn't be any problems."

"I believe there was a bit of a problem, but it was good enough. What was that black foreign car that tried to forcibly pass us earlier?"

"I don't know. It seemed dangerous, so I lightly knocked them away."

With that nonchalant comment, Tsukuyomi shifted gears. After doing it wrong about three times, she smiled bitterly.

"Well, it couldn't have been that bad a drive. Your neighbor there hasn't moved an inch."

"Is that so?"

Sayama turned toward Shinjou to his left.

She had not left a change of clothes at UCAT, so she wore the school's summer uniform below her seatbelt.

A black binder sat next to her and she was facing straight forward with a blank expression.

She was perfectly silent and she shook limply with the shaking of the truck. The way her head bounced around, it looked like her neck had broken.

…Has she…?

She had passed out.

"Sh-Shinjou-kun, wake up."

Even when Sayama grabbed her shoulders and shook her, she gave no response. A look of sudden realization filled Sayama's face.

"This is not good. I must perform CPR!"

"I think you just skipped at least three steps."

He ignored the old woman and began unbuttoning Shinjou's shirt. It was only then that she opened her eyes with a sleepy look.

"Oh, Sayama-kun. Good morn-… What are you doing!? I'm Setsu right now!"

"Why would that matter? Whether Setsu-kun or Sadame-kun, I must perform CPR. And both bodies are equally gropable. …But I suppose these pads are indeed in the way."

"Ahh… I have no idea where to even start with this."

"Then I will not hold back."

"Wait!" shouted Shinjou just as the truck took a right turn.

Tsukuyomi sharply turned the steering wheel, the six wheels on the bottom of the tractor unit performed their turning action, and a curving trajectory similar to a pivot was created.

An external speaker played a right turn warning in a synthetic female voice.

“Turning to the right. Hard to the right.”

Next, the large truck actually turned.

“Ah,” said Shinjou as everything outside the thick back window began to rotate.

The sealed pallet of the connected cargo container became visible as a shadow.

…What are we going to carry in that huge space?

The fact that it was sealed led Sayama to a certain conclusion which he voiced while placing his head on Shinjou’s lap.

“A god of war? Is that what we are retrieving in addition to the examination device?”

"That is correct, you perverted lady killer."

Once the turn was completed, the sky outside the window stopped moving and a further question arrived.

"You heard that my daughter was abducted, didn't you? I hear you were at the scene last night."

"The pilots of the remaining god of war were a student at our school and an automaton. Who were they fighting ? We are guessing it was 3rd-Gear's Typhon."

"The development department suspects the same. We received a request just before you left last night. We were asked to analyze the string vibration patterns of two large philosopher's stone readings that were flying westward." She took a breath. "We detected the concepts for metal and inertial control, the same as the automatons in UCAT. Did you know that the Kanda laboratory we're headed to has some refugees from 3rd?"

"Refugees? Are they automatons?" asked Shinjou.

"Yes." Tsukuyomi nodded. "They do not say much, but they have made a few things clear. When 3rd-Gear was destroyed, most of the gates were unstable and a lot of automatons fled to this world. Also, the automatons

that fell into this world were ‘found’ in various places. However, they were only made to function in 3rd-Gear, so UCAT wasn’t able to activate them until the concept activation ten years ago.”

Tsukuyomi continued speaking while looking at them through the rearview mirror.

“All 3rd-Gear automatons have at least two abilities: powerful gravitational control to assist their movements and wirelessly shared thoughts with identical types. Due to the latter, the automatons under UCAT protection know that another 3rd-Gear force exists somewhere in Japan. They cannot communicate because they are separated by a concept space, but they can still feel their presence.”

“Then why did they join us? Wouldn’t they want to rescue the others?”

It was Sayama who answered Shinjou’s question.

“They may have feared being taken as hostages against 3rd’s main force. If they are viewed as an enemy, 3rd can act without concern for them. Am I wrong, Director Tsukuyomi?”

"No. That's the rumor. It sounds like the thought process of a combat-oriented Gear's automatons, doesn't it?"

"But does that mean we are assuming we will fight them with no hope for negotiation?"

"Presumably, the automatons do not know the whole truth. However, the main 3rd-Gear force they know of was not a group that would surrender just because their world had been destroyed. My guess is that these automatons have carved that into their memories."

Tsukuyomi nodded toward Sayama who lay in Shinjou's lap.

After seeing that nod, he continued.

"Low-Gear's concept spaces were poorly made, so these automatons could not move properly until ten years ago, but what about 3rd-Gear's main force? If they can use Typhon to create a concept space, it means they have been active since sixty years ago and yet hiding the entire time."

Sayama looked down from the rearview mirror and saw a white building through the large windshield. A

closed metal gate separated them from the hospital-like building.

"That is the Kanda laboratory. Our department has been helping with its security recently. But, Sayama Mikoto, do you object to being called here today?"

"I do. I intended to meet with the pilot of that god of war today."

"Well, I'll handle the Georgius stuff, so you can spend your time getting as much information from the automatons as you can. Just like you did with us."

"I see. It would seem non-humans are becoming my specialty."

"Are you calling us inhuman?"

"Could you not say that a woman who has carried a human and given birth to them goes beyond the realm of humanity?"

That question brought a few seconds of silence.

Amid the silence, Sayama felt a small tap at his shoulder.

It was Shinjou. He could see her looking down at him with flushed cheeks.

“Um, Sayama-kun? That question reminded me.” She spoke quietly with the ends of her eyebrows lowered. “ Do you think I will be able to do that with this body?”

Sayama directly answered her hesitant question while resting his head on her lap.

“You will.”

Shinjou narrowed her eyes.

“I hope so.”

“Do not worry. You definitely will.”

“…Really?”

“Really. After all, I will do my part to help.”

“O-okay, but you could maybe word that differently… ”

She drew back her head in order to hide her blushing face.

"Thank you," she said even more quietly. "I'll do some more research into that kind of thing. …And I'll discuss it with you again."

"Yes. Let us work hard."

"Work hard? …I think we're talking about different things."

"Not at all," said Sayama. "If we work hard, not only can we surpass humanity, but we can surpass godhood as well."

"Eh? Ah, w-wait! You suddenly went way above what I was talking about!"

Sayama frowned at her panicked shout.

"What is it, Shinjou-kun? I was trying to put together a precise plan."

"Don't mention what that plan entails!!"

Just as she shouted, Sayama heard something else.

—Metal is not dead.

Those sudden words made him sit up.

"A concept!"

"I'm glad to see you're quick to switch gears," said Tsukuyomi. "And it looks like they've sent out someone to greet us."

The truck gradually slowed down.

As it shook from momentum and Shinjou let out a sigh of relief, Sayama turned toward the driver's seat.

The white building was still visible through the windshield.

But three things were different from before.

"There's something odd about this."

First, the metal gate was sitting wide open.

Second, several dozen figures wearing maid uniforms were lined up in waiting before the gate.

And third, a giant green armored warrior stood behind them. It was a god of war.

One of the maids stepped forward.

She had red hair.

The truck stopped fifteen meters in front of her.

The red-haired maid suddenly reached a hand toward her collar.

"…"

And she opened the collar to show her neck.

But the bones and flesh of a neck were not there.

It was a mechanical connector.

Two sockets were connected vertically and wires connected the collarbone to the head. Shinjou gasped when she saw it.

"An automaton."

The red-haired automaton looked toward them.

Her orange eyes looked sharply up at them.

"Welcome, but please leave."

She did not shout, but her voice reached the inside of the truck.

The voice seemed to quietly permeate the area as she continued to speak.

“I am sure this is part of a job, but we must make an exception when a relative of Sayama’s is involved. As an automaton of 3rd-Gear, I have a request for this relative of Sayama’s. There is someone here who you must not be allowed to meet. As such, please leave. If you do not…”

Sayama saw movement.

The giant armored warrior behind the maids took a step forward.

In the concept, its metal body had the litheness and gentleness of living flesh, but it also had great weight.

The one step produced a heavy metallic sound. It then took a second and third step. The fourth step brought the god of war in front of the automatons and next to the red-haired maid.

Its giant legs were spread at shoulder width and its arms were spread lightly to both sides.

It could freely begin battle at any time like that.

However, the red-haired automaton spoke without so much as glancing toward it.

“Please leave. I also ask that you hold no interest in 3rd-Gear. Dealing with 3rd-Gear will sully the Leviathan Road.”

Miyako was brought back to the previous room.

Moira 1st led her by a hand. After a few seconds on an elevator-like device from the side entrance, she was right next to the emergency exit she had fallen from.

What is going on? she wondered.

Moira 1st remained silent and did not rebuke her for what she had done and the other maids were not with them. The lack of defense and the lack of punishment seemed to indicate that they did not view her as an enemy.

…They are saying they will not harm me and so I shouldn't run away.

Before they entered the previous room, Moira 1st looked over her shoulder.

With a slight smile on her face, she passed through the white knob-less door and entered the room.

"Princess, please come in."

Miyako placed a hand on the door and asked the maid a question.

"Why are you going in first? What if I suddenly closed the door and ran off?"

"If you are willing to say that, I can assume you will not actually do it."

"Oh? And what if I do?"

"Feel free."

Miyako slammed the door shut.

The slamming noise satisfied her quite a bit.

…What should I do?

Despite her thought, she remained motionless in front of the closed door. If Moira 1st was testing her, she would test Moira 1st. She had no intention of running, but she wanted to see how the maid would react.

Would all of those previous maids arrive? Would Moira 1st pursue her on her own? Either way, they would try to restrain her. Their style of no defense and no punishment would be meaningless once they restrained her. She would have plenty of reason to feel rebellious.

"…"

But nothing happened. Moira 1st showed no sign of speaking from the room and there was no sign of the other maids taking action based on the noise of the door.

And so Miyako left the door to continue this test. She intentionally produced footsteps on the red carpet, but there was still no sign of anything from the room or elsewhere.

And so Miyako continued walking. She turned at several corners and reached the previous emergency exit. It had felt like a long run before, but it was surprisingly close by.

The exit was still standing open.

She walked further. The wind and light coming in through the exit were those of summer, but something felt off about the wind.

She thought about what it was.

…There are no smells from the city.

The wind did not contain the slight heat, oppressiveness, or exhaust smell that a city produced.

This place made no sense. When she thought about it, the giant that had lowered her to the ground and the one in the hangar were odd too. If they showed themselves outside the building, someone would notice.

…What is this place?

She looked up and saw Kurashiki through the emergency exit.

…That should be real.

She stepped outside the emergency exit. There were no stairs, but there was the elevator surrounded by a railing.

The rails of the elevator circled around to the side in order to avoid the hangar door below.

The hangar door was closed now and the blue giant was nowhere to be seen. The same went for the white giant.

"…"

As she leaned over the railing and looked at the distant city, she suddenly noticed something.

Beyond the twenty meter earth clearing in front of the hangar, a man stood in a forest primarily composed of broadleaf trees.

The young man wore white clothes. His back was turned toward her and his blond hair was even longer than hers. He did not turn toward her and he merely stood in the forest looking into the distance.

"Is he looking at the city?"

Did that young man live here?

When she had tried to escape, she had not seen him in the framed paintings. If those paintings were of the deceased, he might have been the current master.

In that case, she felt she could clear away a lot of the doubt in her heart.

She thought about using the elevator to head down, but she stopped.

There was no movement around her. No one came to pursue her and no one shouted at her.

“Dammit. What are they doing?”

While feeling reluctant to leave the figure standing below, she returned to the hallway. After arriving at the door with long strides, she threw it open.

“What the hell are you doing!? And what is this place!? Who are you people!?”

As she asked those questions, she saw Moira 1st standing before a table in front of the bed. She was

transferring dishes over from the stretcher she had brought in. The maid smiled and turned toward her.

"It will take a little longer to prepare, so you can look outside for a little longer if you wish."

"…"

Miyako moved closer to Moira 1st while aware of the harshness on her face.

After approaching so close their foreheads almost collided, she spoke the words she had prepared in her heart.

"Do you never get mad when people act like I do?"

"Have you ever done anything malicious to us, princess?" asked Moira 1st. "Have you ever tried to destroy us?"

"Well…" started Miyako as she recalled her actions.

At the very least, she was honorable enough not to punch someone who had not acted maliciously toward her.

But she still tilted her head.

" 'Destroy' has an unpleasant ring to it. And why is your Japanese that poor? With that and that giant robot down below, there's something odd about this place."

"It is not odd because it is all only natural."

Moira 1st stopped preparing the meal.

She placed a hand on her collar and scarf and removed the scarf from her neck.

"This is a temporary alternate world that exists out of phase with your world. It is known as a concept space. I will explain the details later, but we are the only residents."

She opened her collar down to the chest, but this did not reveal what one would expect.

The flesh and bones that would form the neck, collarbone, and chest were not there.

Instead, there were rounded white parts connected at the joints like a doll.

"Our bodies are made from a metal and ceramic frame added to flesh that is modelled after a human's. The joints are made with wires and plastic. We are automatons."

Moira 1st's smile deepened and the movement of wires caused her head to tilt above the neck which connected similarly to a light bulb socket.

"Will that be enough for you to believe me, princess?"

Chapter 5: Machine Footsteps

Chapter 5

“Machine Footsteps”

Even with one’s eyes closed, the differences in the piercing sounds are noticeable
The similarities are also noticeable
That is why it is so troublesome

Even with one's eyes closed, the differences in the piercing sounds are noticeable

The similarities are also noticeable

That is why it is so troublesome

Wind blew through a wide area between the large buildings of Kanda.

But that wind was not of this world. It had the thin scent of an alternate world.

Several automatons stood in the path of that wind that smelled slightly of metal.

The god of war and the red-haired automaton standing in front of them faced their opponent.

A boy stood in front of the truck stopped fifteen meters away. He wore a gray suit.

"I assume you are Sayama Mikoto," she said. "Why have you exited the truck? We asked for you to leave."

"That does not matter. However, I would like to ask your name."

"And what will you do with that knowledge?"

"I will negotiate with you. I will ask what will sully the Leviathan Road and I will negotiate a means of cleansing that impurity."

"I see," said the red-haired maid with a nod.

She determined she needed to answer in order for the conversation to continue smoothly.

"#8. That is my ID." #8 nodded. "You say you wish for knowledge of the impurity?"

"I will not say it a second time. Or a third time. Make sure you remember."

"Understood. But I cannot speak of what the impurity entails. Telling you would produce unnecessary curiosity and cross a point of no return. Simply think of 3rd-Gear as inviolable and leave."

"Knowledge of it would cross a point of no return? In that case, I do not see how anyone could know about it."

Deciding his point was valid, #8 nodded and carefully chose how to express herself.

"Can anyone set foot in muddy water without growing dirty? We are considerately attempting to prevent anyone else from growing dirty."

Sayama smiled when he heard that.

"So you are driving people away out of consideration? Is that because you have betrayed UCAT and returned to 3rd-Gear?"

The maids behind her began to move at that comment. They moved to restrain him.

But #8 stopped them by raising her right hand lightly.

"Why do you think we have betrayed UCAT?"

"After speaking for a bit, you have not once replied with 'testament'. The one I know may be a bit unique, but automatons should strictly follow their own definitions. In that case, the lack of 'testament' means you have left UCAT."

"I see. It is true that the importance of the word ' testament' has fallen for us. And do you know what that means?"

"If you are out front after betraying UCAT, it means you have taken control of this Kanda laboratory," said Sayama. "Also, under some condition, your refugee definitions have switched to 3rd-Gear's definitions. What might that condition be?"

"The linked self-defense instincts of an automaton. The specific condition was your arrival. We believe your presence will certainly result in our harm."

"And what harm would that be?"

"That is a personal issue of the automatons at the Kanda laboratory, so I cannot answer."

"And so you are driving me away in the name of protecting me from some impurity?"

"Yes," answered #8. "The negotiation has already begun. Will you leave?"

She waved both arms as she spoke.

That motion produced black metal parts from her sleeves.

They belonged to handguns.

Barrels, grips, mechanisms, and magazines spilled out into the air.

“Or will you be destroyed here? Those are your only options.”

The metal firearms were assembled in midair using gravitational control.

As the parts fell into place and tightened, a spray of metallic noises filled the air and a gun flew into each of her hands.

She now held two handguns.

“We once welcomed someone in this same fashion. After falling to this world sixty years ago, we were gathered here, but we took control of the laboratory upon awakening when the concepts activated ten years ago.”

#8 struck her heel against the ground.

That metallic noise acted as a signal and the god of war next to her moved. It drew the two swords worn at its waist.

And she spoke over the metallic noises they caused.

“Those negotiations led to us taking up residence here. But we cannot allow the same result this time. Please leave, negotiator. We must ensure that 3rd-Gear’s impurity is untouched, that the people of the Kanda laboratory remain safe, and that no harm comes to our fellow automatons.”

“I see,” replied the boy. “So you have three bargaining chips to have me leave: your consideration concerning the impurity, your hostages, and the harm to your fellow automatons.”

“I have determined those three are enough.”

“Yes, it is enough. That is plenty for me to break down and create a path.”

With that comment, Sayama took action.

He pulled two objects from within his suit: a shotgun and a submachine gun.

He spread his arms with the shotgun in his left hand and the submachine gun in his right and he faced forward.

"I will now eliminate the foundation of your bargaining chips with a single statement."

"And what is that?"

"It is simple," he said. "The surname Sayama indicates a villain. It is incredibly simple, automaton."

What a pain, thought Sayama. *Truly a pain.*

Someone was already fighting 3rd-Gear. And that person was younger, he was most certainly inexperienced, and his resolve seemed to be wavering.

But he was desperately fighting as if clinging to something. He had some reason for that and he was prepared to keep Team Leviathan at a distance.

And so Sayama thought about his role as the Leviathan Road's negotiator.

…I must grow even more desperate and face 3rd-Gear.

"Are you going to stand in my way here, automaton? I am trying to learn about the world you came from."

"We stand in your way specifically because it is our world you wish to learn about."

"If you are going to call it inviolable, do not call it 'our' world."

Sayama lowered the guns in his hands and walked forward.

"If no one can touch something, it belongs to no one. It becomes a closed world where you cannot even secure a firm footing for yourself. But a world is an open thing by nature."

So…

"There is no such thing as an inviolable world."

He waved the shotgun in his left hand through the air and he looked up into the blue sky.

"Inside an inviolable cage, the sky is safe, the wind is safe, the earth is safe, and the night and day are safe. But that is why no one can grow desperate while surrounded by walls. Will you show your consideration despite that, hypocritical automaton? Only a child enjoys being shown consideration by someone in a glass box."

As he continued to walk and smiled bitterly, #8 asked a question.

"But I have determined it is children who enjoy growing dirty in mud. Don't adults avoid that?"

The first bargaining chip, thought Sayama. *The negotiation begins.*

He nodded and opened his mouth.

"So you say adults avoid the mud?"

"Am I wrong? And please do not simply say I am wrong. Give me a reason."

"I see. Then let me say this: you are wrong." A bitter smile. "Unfortunately, automaton, there are two types of adults: those who grow upset when dirtied by mud and

those who laugh at themselves when dirtied by mud. And there are two types of those who laugh at themselves: those who will grow upset when someone scolds them for it and those who laugh off any scolding. …Listen."

He continued forward and reached a distance of ten meters away.

"I do not know what this impurity of yours is, but there are definitely people who will view it as something other than dirty."

"And you are one such person?"

"It is hard to say." He tilted his head. "I may not be."

"Then…!"

"But I am not the only person in the world. At the very least, there is someone in my world who is my exact opposite. There is also a foolish S&M couple, a perverted old man, a teacher who feigns ignorance, as well as plenty of comrades, enemies, and others."

And…

"Even those who have died and those yet to be born are my allies."

Hearing that, #8's expression changed.

Her eyebrows grew flat and all expression vanished from her face.

That expressionless look could only mean one thing.

…Her bargaining chip has changed.

The discussion of the first one was over. He did not know what she had decided, but he would not let his guard down until the entire negotiation was over and they had shaken hands in agreement.

As he walked even closer, #8 asked another question while raising the handgun in her left hand.

"Then what about the workers of the Kanda laboratory ?"

The answer to this question was even simpler than with the first bargaining chip.

As he walked, he shrugged.

"Do I even need to say anything when you could have already killed them for all I know?"

"Then what if you could confirm their safety?"

At the same time, she pulled the trigger of the raised handgun.

A gunshot rang through the air.

And with that as a signal, the laboratory door opened.

Men in work uniforms exited the glass door with their hands in the air. A closer look showed even more inside the dark space beyond the door.

With them and their grim looks far behind her, #8 lowered her left hand and spoke.

"Our sharpshooting ability is unmatched. What do you say now?"

"I see. Then I have just one thing to say to them."

"Which is?"

"Good luck. That is all."

…This is only natural.

"I am here to complete the Leviathan Road. In that case, is it my job to rescue the captured workers of the Kanda laboratory? It isn't, is it? They can handle their issues while I handle mine."

"…You do not care if they die?"

"It would be a problem if they die, but their survival is their responsibility. No matter what decision I make, they should not leave their survival up to another person . If they do not wish to die by your hand, they should not die based on my decision either. That is all."

"I have determined that is sophistry."

"But I have moved forward. You need to learn that the world deals in facts, not sophistry."

He was now five meters away.

And #8's eyebrows moved. She was trying to decide whether to fire or not, but her decision was not immediate.

She was hesitating.

…Will she shoot them?

With a single bitter laugh, Sayama decided to speak.

"Now, then. Let us move on to your final bargaining chip."

That comment returned #8's eyebrows to their flat position.

She looked him in the eye and then lowered her gaze a bit. For just an instant, she glanced at the workers behind her.

"Thank you for your consideration," she finally said.

"Make no mistake. I merely find this negotiation to be a pain and wish to hurry it along. You need not feel thankful."

"Understood. Then let us discuss the final bargaining chip."

"Yes. You said my arrival will bring harm to one of you, didn't you?"

He was already only three meters from #8.

And he suddenly raised his left arm to point the shotgun forward.

He targeted #8.

“This is my answer,” he said expressionlessly. “If I destroy you here, it will prove that not even that hope of yours can be achieved.”

As soon as he spoke, #8 took action. She first opened her eyes wide.

“!!”

And she vigorously swung her left hand up once more .

Before he could react, something arrived.

It was a wind. The god of war’s sword whipped up the wind as it was swung down overhead.

At the same time, a metallic noise rang out and the god of war flew up into the air.

"…"

With a clear noise, the armor plate on its chest broke and a beam of white light flew from its back.

Without turning around, Sayama smiled.

"Wonderfully done, Shinjou-kun."

Shinjou held Ex-St atop the truck's roof.

It had been quickly prepared when they left UCAT and Sayama would likely have been unable to take his weapons with him if Tsukuyomi had not been with them .

While her head felt heavy after focusing, she lowered Ex-St from her shoulder.

She heard the god of war collapse.

The sound of crashing heavy metal sounded like a musical instrument being played at random.

As she realized she had produced that result, she looked down.

Down and to the right, Tsukuyomi was leaning out of the truck window and watching Sayama.

“Now, what will he do? I was wondering what would happen ever since that stupid boy said combat was a possibility if we were dealing with 3rd-Gear automatons.”

“Yes,” agreed Shinjou. “That may be how the Leviathan Road works. If we are to rethink our relationships after the war, we can also redo everything from the beginning.”

Shinjou started to dismantle Ex-St to return it to its case that sat in the back of the truck.

“Let me handle that. You hurry to him.”

“Eh?”

“Only you and his meagre self-restraint can stop him, right?”

Shinjou thought about that and finally smiled bitterly.

"I hope you're right…"

She then heard several sounds from the front of the truck where Sayama was.

They were gunshots. And quite a few of them at once.

She turned around and cried out.

"Sayama-kun!"

As he heard the god of war falling over, Sayama heard #8 shout.

"Defend!"

She did not say what to defend.

But in response to her shout, four automatons leaped forward to his left and four did the same to his right.

Their maid uniforms flipped up and they formed a half-circle around him with weapons in both hands.

But he had already started to move.

He moved forward.

As he saw them position themselves in an arc, he had a single thought.

…They have opened up gaps to avoid friendly fire.

His opponents were armed with firearms just like him.

In that case, a factor other than firepower would determine the winner.

There were three such factors.

First, there was speed.

Second, there was position.

Third, there was mentality.

Those factors could be affected by tactics.

And Sayama had lived with the Tamiya family until two years ago. They had originally been a yakuza family and they had weapons.

…And I have my grandfather's training!

And so he did not hesitate to move forward. A skilled group and a firefight lay at close range. Distance was almost meaningless here and something else mattered more.

…Position!

What position would aid him and put his opponents at a disadvantage?

That would be right in front of an enemy. The other enemies would be unable to fire for fear of friendly fire.

The third maid from the right had black hair and she raised a handgun in her left hand.

She seemed to be the only one with a handgun.

And the short weapon could reach firing position fastest.

That was why he prioritized her and charged in toward her.

From there, his speed said everything.

Without killing the momentum of his charge, he used the shotgun in his left hand to sweep away the arm holding her gun.

“!?”

With a light impact, her arm moved to the left.

That arm obstructed the path of the fourth maid from the right, slowing her movements.

Sayama then jumped to the left and charged toward the side of the fourth maid from the right who had stumbled a bit.

While sweeping the third maid’s arm upwards, he jabbed his left elbow into the now-unguarded side of the fourth one.

“!”

The fourth maid doubled over and collapsed.

One down.

In response, the second maid from the right and the fifth maid from the right raised submachine guns.

They moved to trap him where he was in front of the third maid and the collapsed fourth maid.

But they were too slow. His left arm remained bent from the previous elbow jab, so the shotgun barrel was pointed to the right. He also passed the submachine gun under his left arm to aim it to the left.

With his arms crossed as if in an embrace, he fired both guns.

He hit twice.

The second and fifth maids were blasted in either direction. Counting the fourth maid in front of him, that was three down.

But the first maid from the right and the sixth, seventh, and eight maids on the right had taken action.

The one on the right and three on the left had already raised their guns.

“Nn!”

With that voice, four gunshots rang out. As expected, there was one from the right and three from the left.

The bullets arrived. Also, the third maid in front of him had brought back her arm.

Sayama hurried forward while uncrossing his arms.

He jumped up. As his arms met in the middle in the process of uncrossing them, they deflected the third maid ’s arm upwards once more.

“…”

He heard a metallic noise and her handgun flew into the air.

She was now wide open.

He spread his arms and moved forward while listening to the four bullets passing by behind him.

As he stepped forward, he raised his right leg and jabbed his knee into the third maid’s right side.

The strike knocked the third maid away, making four down.

He used the impact of the knee jab to rotate backwards to the right.

As he did, he saw #8 standing beyond the others.

"Wait there!"

He would make sure to take her on.

He felt faint irritation as he wondered why the representative of the Leviathan Road had to fight automatons who were not the representatives of 3rd-Gear.

Even so, he was aware that he had partially wanted this.

…Are they desperate as well?

He wanted to know why. He felt he needed to know. He mentally nodded twice, ended his spin to the right, and leaped toward her. He quickly ran to the right.

The only maid remaining to the right was the one originally first from the right.

She had brown hair and she raised a rifle in her left hand.

In the instant she took aim, Sayama swung his submachine gun to the right.

An instant later, she pulled the trigger.

The rifle fired at the same moment that his weapon struck her arm and knocked it to the right.

The gunshot passed by the right side of his face and the bullet grazed his hair, but it did not hit him.

He stepped forward and raised the shotgun in his left hand while holding her rifle away with the submachine gun in his right hand.

But this time, she defended.

She stepped back and swept his shotgun upwards with her empty hand.

And she did not stop there.

After sweeping the shotgun upwards, she grabbed the barrel.

Sayama pulled back the weapon so she could not swipe it.

But then he felt pain. It was the phantom pain from his left fist. That pain from the past made him grimace.

"…!"

The shotgun was forcefully pulled from his grasp.

The maid in front of his eyes smiled as she held his shotgun.

She tossed it behind her and then looked behind him.

"Fire!"

Sayama did not look behind him.

He understood what the maid before him wanted. She would stop him and let herself be shot by the three behind him.

…A ridiculous decision!

"So you dolls have decided to sacrifice yourselves!?"

And so he moved. He would not let this doll be shot by her allies. They were attempting to produce something from a death.

…No matter what, I cannot let them accomplish that idea!

His only weapon was the submachine gun in his right hand. He was using it to hold her rifle away.

But he let go of the submachine gun.

He lost his weapon.

However…

"I have more than just guns."

As the maid's eyes widened in surprise, he charged toward her and jabbed his elbow into her gut.

With a sound of impact, she was knocked away.

He turned around while watching her rifle and his submachine gun fall to the ground.

Behind him, he saw the remaining three aiming rifles at him.

They were aiming and preparing to pull the trigger.

In that instant, he held his left hand out in front of him.

That hand was empty, but something fell into it.

It was a handgun.

This was the handgun he had used his crossed arms to knock from the hand of the third maid from the right earlier.

As soon as he had it in his grasp, he fired.

A great sound filled the area.

Of the three maids, the middle one was blown away. The remaining two fired, but their bullets passed by either side of him.

At the same time, he heard a metallic noise on the ground behind him.

The submachine gun he had let go of and the rifle of the maid he had elbowed had struck the ground.

With a snap of his wrist, he tossed the handgun overhead.

He crouched down, swung both hands backwards, and grabbed the submachine gun and rifle as they bounced off the ground.

He raised the weapons in front of him and fired.

The two remaining maids took direct hits and collapsed backwards.

The eight were down.

But Sayama did not catch his breath. He tossed aside both guns and used his left hand to grab the handgun he had tossed overhead.

He turned toward someone to his right.

It was #8.

"…!"

Sayama ran.

In response, #8 took quick action.

She tried to raise both handguns she held to target his face.

“I am serious!”

Her shout seemed to pierce through the air, but Sayama paid it no heed and moved forward.

But he would not make it in time. It would not take her long to raise the handguns. She held them right next to each other to target the center of his face.

“Is this your decision!?”

Sayama replied with his actions.

As he took the last running step with his left leg, he swung the knee up and jabbed the shin and knee straight up toward the heavens.

“…!”

As #8 tried to raise her arms, they struck either side of his knee.

Her hands stopped.

"!?"

At the same time, he threw his body forward. He pressed his forehead against his raised knee.

His face passed between the guns held apart by his knee.

And #8 pulled the triggers.

Gunshots passed by either side of his face.

But they naturally missed. Sayama swung down his raised left leg to slam his heel down. At the same time, #8 frantically moved back.

And he moved forward to pursue her.

He maintained his forward momentum and threw his lowering left leg forward. He was already close enough to collide with #8 and he looked at her surprised expression.

At the same moment, his left foot reached the asphalt and he made his step.

Using the force of his step, he pointed the gun in his left hand at #8.

In that instant…

“Sayama-kun!”

He heard Shinjou’s voice.

And so he took action. He first let go of his gun.

“I will now show you my conclusion.”

As he spoke, he wrapped his arms around #8’s waist from below and placed her over his shoulder.

“Ah…!”

As he lifted her up, she was surprisingly light.

With a bitter smile, he took a few light steps forward, lowered his speed, and came to a stop.

As #8 struggled atop his shoulder, he used his hands to stop her legs from moving and he spoke.

“I almost forgot. Dolls are meant to be held and handled with care.”

And…

“I respect that sort of thinking.”

For just a moment after his comment, #8 stopped moving.

But she quickly began struggling once more as if she had suddenly remembered the situation.

“Wh-what is the meaning of this!?”

“Be still. Do you wish to go through the losing ritual in front of your fellow automatons?”

"What is the losing ritual?"

"I treat you like a doll." Sayama nodded and spoke to the other automatons in the area. "After stripping you naked, I will restrain you within every splendid outfit I can think of. Then, after placing you in a seat where you cannot move, I will have you enjoy a fake meal made from mud and leaves. And we can sing: 'Hi ho! Hi ho!' As automatons who live by a motto of modest service, that would be unbearably painful, would it not?"

#8 gasped and the surrounding automatons all took a frightened step back.

Sayama nodded toward them all.

"While I am at it, I can place you in a glass box and continually play a music box until you fall asleep. How about that?"

"Y-you cannot be serious. If you did that, rumor would spread that the losers of the Leviathan Road are cruelly abused."

"It is up to you whether this happens or not. I believe in democracy, so I respect the opinions of individuals. And in accordance with democracy, any who oppose me

shall receive an individual vigilante punishment. …How about that?”

#8 stopped moving. The surrounding automatons did the same.

Silence fell.

As the stillness reminded them of the wind’s presence, Sayama focused on his own body.

The heat lowering from the right side of his forehead was likely blood. He was sweaty and he was pleasantly exhausted.

He then heard a noise from behind him: footsteps.

When he took a breath and turned around, he saw Shinjou running toward him with a look of relief.

She nodded and smiled with the ends of her eyebrows lowered. Her smile said she was fine and that he should face his opponents.

He faced forward, looked each of the automatons in the eye in turn, and then gently lowered #8 from his shoulder.

Her red hair was disheveled, her shoulders were limp, and she had no expression on her face.

“I have determined this was unreasonable,” she said. “ Why should we listen to what you wish to say?”

“That is simple: because you wish to find a new answer after listening to me,” he said. “You already have your answer, but is there no other acceptable answer? To find out, listen to what I have to say. I want you to help me think up a new answer.”

“But…”

Unable to make a decision, #8 repeated the same word.

“But…!”

Just as she spoke that duplicate word, she was interrupted.

“I have determined that is sufficient.”

This was a new voice.

All the automatons, including #8, turned toward the main entrance. Countless figures stood in front of the white building.

They were mostly the Kanda laboratory's workers, but one figure standing in front of the others was not. She was a blonde girl in a maid uniform and Shinjou spoke the common term for her identity.

"An automaton?"

"Testament," she replied. "I am #4. I am the leader of the automatons here." She was expressionless. "I am ashamed of my fellow automatons' actions here. I hope you are not disappointed in their combat ability."

"No, they were an excellent opponent for my first actual battle in a while."

As he spoke, Sayama looked around.

The maids he had defeated were slowly beginning to get up.

"It was a good thing you were wearing UCAT maid uniforms. I assumed they would be at least bulletproof."

"Well done. I understand now that this new negotiator to appear before us is also one who will force us to face him. In that case, please come this way," said #4. "I will tell you and show you as much as I can concerning 3rd-Gear's impurity and its destruction. We have been waiting ever since your grandfather provided us with this place ten years ago."

The word 'grandfather' brought pain to Sayama.

"…"

He brought his right hand to his chest and Baku frantically hopped from his pocket and onto his shoulder . Despite the pain and pulse in his chest, he expressionlessly took a breath.

"My grandfather gave you this place?"

"Testament. When we awoke due to the concept activation ten years ago, we took control of this place. However, we had two problems. First, the foundation of our memories was created on the idea of serving people, so having others protect us would create a self-contradiction which we would reject by ceasing to function. Second, serving someone from this world

would be a betrayal to 3rd-Gear." #4 nodded and continued smiling. "Ten years ago, your grandfather was sent as a negotiator to eliminate our control of this place. He ordered us to join Low-Gear and serve one who lives here. He said that would not be a betrayal to 3rd-Gear because it would prevent us from being a burden to them in an emergency."

"And so you have worked here for the decade since?"

"Testament. And we have been waiting for the good-for-nothing grandson that your grandfather would often mention. I must ask that you go along with these lingering feelings of a doll for a bit longer."

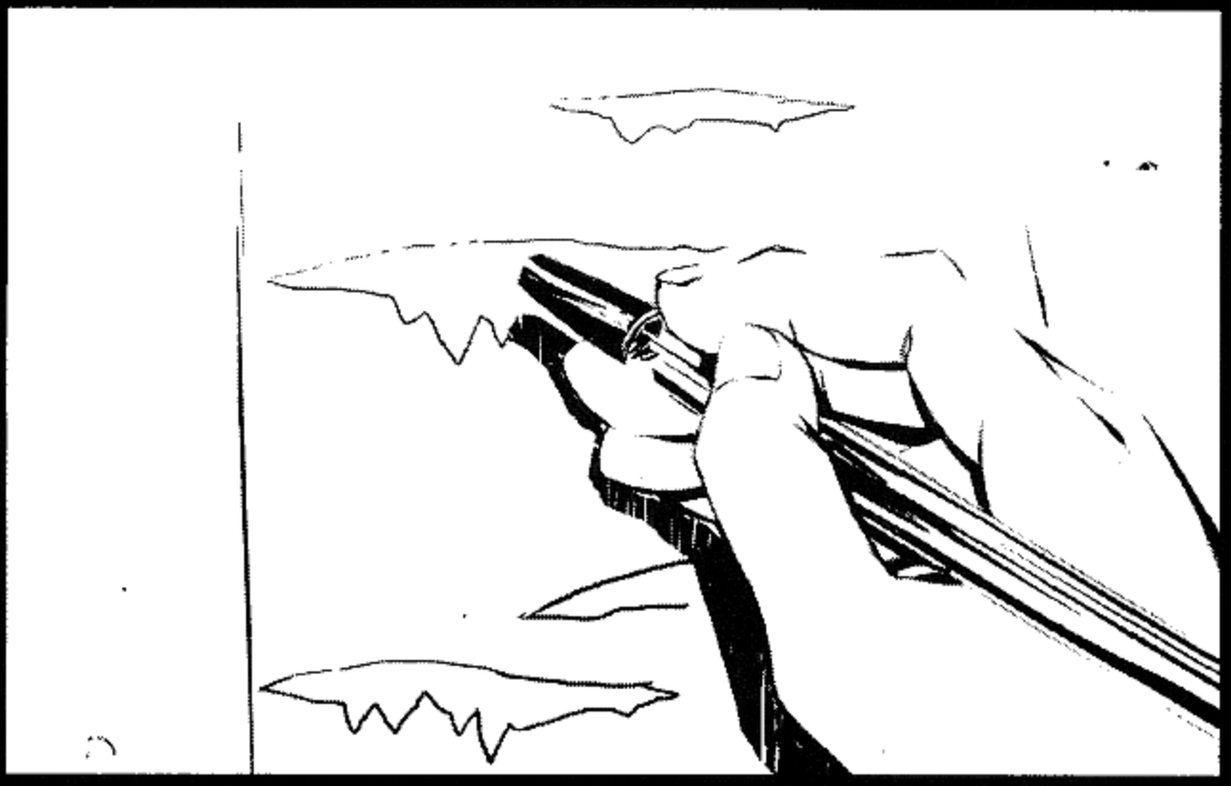
She bowed.

"I believe I will now speak of the past with you and give you a test. As the one who once negotiated with your grandfather, I will determine what kind of person you are and whether you are actually good-for-nothing."

Chapter 6: Driving Questions

Chapter 6

“Driving Questions”



Where does the initial question lead?
To question is to go and to return
They let you test yourself and look back

Where does the initial question lead?

To question is to go and to return

They let you test yourself and look back

By the afternoon on the day before the closing ceremony, very few students remained in the Kinugasa Library.

The shouts and sounds of the sports teams could be heard from the schoolyard.

That provided the background noise for the three people who sat motionless at the table in the center of the library.

A cloth map of Japan was spread out on the table while Izumo, Kazami, and Hiba sat around it.

Hiba started by asking Kazami a cautious question with a serious expression.

“You aren’t going to hit me?”

"Y'know, I think you've gotten the wrong impression of me. I won't hit you if you do nothing wrong."

"Eh? R-really? Strange. That isn't what everyone says …"

As he tilted his head several times, Kazami clenched her fist below the table while considering actually hitting him. Hiba seemed to catch on because he quickly put on a smile.

"Oh, s-sorry. Anyway…"

"Yes. What do you want?"

"Well… Before I explain 3rd-Gear's impurity, I want to quickly go over their history."

"Sounds good."

With her agreement urging him on, he reached for a piece of paper on the table. He also picked up a ballpoint pen and drew on the white back of the paper.

The drawing looked like a few floating islands.

"Um, this is actually a cross-section. 3rd-Gear was apparently a collection of giant floating continents." Hiba tapped at the center of the drawing with the back of the pen. "It supposedly also had an ocean long ago, but it was always this shape and so it didn't have very many people. The people of 3rd-Gear had long lives and they each had a special ability coming from one of the concepts supporting the world. In other words, they had lifespans of several thousand years and the powers supporting the world were distributed among them."

"Distributed?"

"Yes. The Concept Core was divided up and they received a portion when they were born. You could say they were humanoid concepts rather than people."

"When they died, was that concept extracted and returned?"

"Not just that. From what I've heard, they had a single device that took the wills of those bearing the concepts and stored them in the Concept Core. Do you understand what that means?"

"Their Concept Core worked like an underworld, right ?" answered Izumo with little interest in his voice. " When those with the concepts died, their residual will and concept would be stored in the Concept Core. And when a new life was born, the concept would be recycled into them, but the wills would simply accumulate in the Concept Core. That's an artificial Tartaros."

"Yes. That is why 3rd-Gear called their Concept Core the Tartaros and called the device sending them there the Tartaros Machina."

Kazami thought on what Hiba said with a smile.

"If they had technology like that, 3rd-Gear must have been a pretty advanced world."

"Yes. That is why their civilization advanced with an extreme focus in one direction. They altered the world as they saw fit, they created automatons to make up for their lacking manpower, and they created machines modeled after themselves to increase an individual's strength. Do you know how gods of war are piloted?"

Kazami thought about the device underneath UCAT. UCAT had experimentally created that large humanoid

machine and it was primarily operated remotely, but she knew that was not the standard method.

"A human combines with it, right?"

"Correct. Because they could turn metal into a living thing, a god of war contains the same systems as a human. The pilot is broken down and taken inside those systems."

Hiba raised his right hand and lightly rotated it, mixing up the warm gentle air of the library.

"It feels less like you're riding it and more like you've grown and have armor and reinforced parts attached. When the god of war is damaged, the injury is sent back to your own body when it is reconstructed."

A bitter smile suddenly replaced Hiba's serious expression. He knew they would not understand.

He must have fought in quite a few battles up until now, thought Kazami as she watched him.

He clearly knew there were times when others would not understand his stance.

…I hope we can understand.

She sighed inwardly.

"Anyway, let's get back on topic. How was 3rd-Gear destroyed?"

"Well, it was a floating continent civilization, but there was one thing that truly started the advancement of their civilization."

"The Concept War?"

"Yes. When they learned of their world's concepts and coming destruction, they realized their civilization and concepts were very powerful and gave them the upper hand. But…" Hiba scratched at his head and hesitated to continue. "Due to what I mentioned before, their civilization reached a dead end."

"A dead end?"

Hiba looked up and compared the look on Kazami's and Izumo's faces.

"How does one increase the population?"

Kazami and Izumo fell silent.

After taking about five breaths, Izumo raised his right hand while facing forward.

“Chisato-sensei, may I give a clear and erotic answer?”

“…We all know the answer, so you don’t have to say it .”

“Hmm,” groaned Izumo as he lowered his hand.

Hiba slowly clenched his fist to show his agreement.

“Well done, Izumo-san. You’re exactly the kind of person I heard you were.”

“I see. Then do your best to show me some respect. Too many people have been unable to see my value recently. …Chisato, why are you giving me that displeased look?”

“Honestly, I don’t even care anymore. Anyway, Hiba-kun… No, I think calling you Hiba is good enough. ”

"Wh-why would you drop the '-kun'? Aren't I your adorable underclassman?"

Kazami ignored that comment.

"Anyway, Hiba, what does increasing the population have to do with 3rd-Gear's destruction?"

"Well, you know how animals are said to need a population above a certain level to increase in number? What if they were only just barely at that level before the Concept War?" He took a breath. "They only ever had as many people as there were concept pieces supporting the world. …Now what if they went to war?"

Kazami froze in place. *Wait*, she thought to keep herself from reaching too hasty a conclusion.

"Wait a second. Don't you normally encourage population growth before a war?"

"The Concept War isn't something you see coming. The fight is suddenly brought to you. At least, that's apparently how it was for 3rd-Gear. When 9th's troops invaded 3rd, they were held off by the gods of war and automatons, but 3rd-Gear panicked. They did not know

whether they should solidify their defenses or head out to war."

"Then…" Kazami thought. She looked up at the ceiling and sighed when she reached her conclusion. " 3rd-Gear went out to war, didn't they? They wanted to finish things before their population could fall too far."

"Yes. Their current king was named Cronus. I've heard that he was skilled at making automatons and gods of war and that he created further longevity methods to keep the population from falling. And he also modified the Tartaros Machina to be used for invasions. He made it so people's concepts could be removed while still alive. Otherwise, 3rd-Gear would have been destroyed if more than half the residents left the Gear for an invasion." Hiba shrugged. "But Cronus could not fully ease the people's fears, so his position was usurped by his son."

"Was his son named Zeus? According to Greek mythology, Cronus was kicked from the throne by Zeus and a culture of fighting and pleasure was created under Zeus's rule."

The corner of Izumo's mouth rose in a smile and he brought a hand to the map before him.

He pointed toward Okaayama's Kojima Peninsula in the Setouchi region.

"Is that fighting and pleasure the impurity that's apparently somewhere around here?"

"You're close. But when it is created for a war, what does that make it?" asked Hiba. "We're getting to the main issue now."

I hate studying, thought Miyako.

She faced forward while scratching at her head and sitting on the bed with one knee raised.

Moira 1st was on the other side of the stretcher that had previously contained a meal.

She was crouched down and used both hands to hold something on top of the stretcher.

It was a thin B4-size board with a drawing on the side pointed toward Miyako. The drawing depicted their world being destroyed and she read the explanation written on the back.

It was a kamishibai.

According to Moira 1st, when her fellow automatons had gone outside, an educational facility had taught about society using this method.

…They must have snuck into a kindergarten.

That had to have been a very long time ago when the Showa era was still in its middle period. If their story was true, it would have been about sixty years ago.

As Miyako thought about the past, Moira 1st flipped to the next board.

A king named Zeus was giving instructions to the people.

It was a crude drawing made with crayon, but Zeus was one of the people she had seen in the picture frames in the hallway. He was the man with a blond beard.

Past the picture, Moira 1st spoke with a slight smile.

"Now, the king was eager to get things started. 'Wah hah hah. Be fruitful and multiply.' It became okay for family members to have children together."

"Wait a second. Don't say that in such an exciting and enjoyable way!"

"But that is what happened. …Oh, are you out of snacks?"

"I still have this cigarette gum."

"I see."

With a smile, Moira 1st flipped to a board with a picture of a cell.

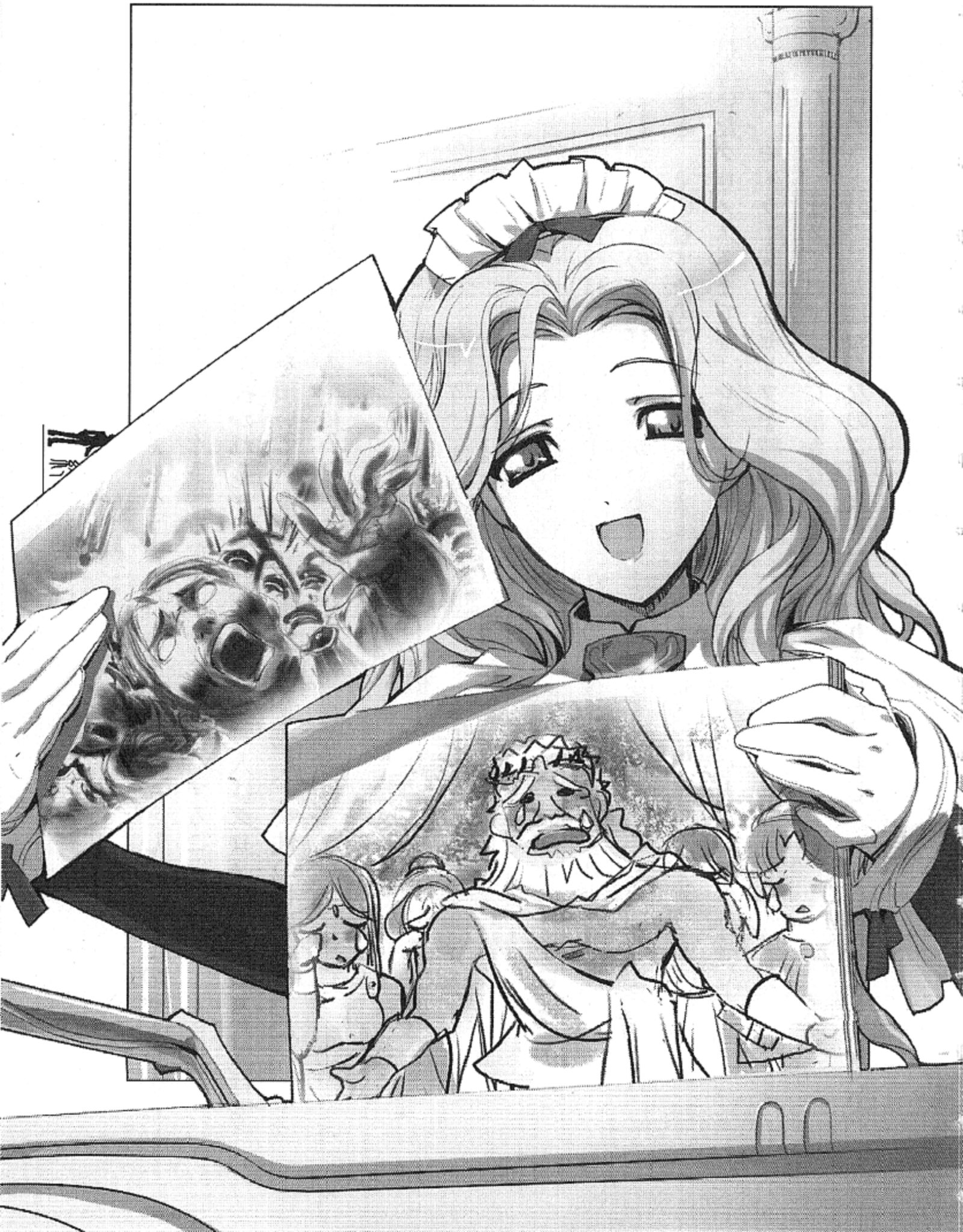
The cell contained some kind of laboratory and a gray-haired old man stood within it. He looked the same as one of the people in the hallway picture frames. He was holding the metal bars like a monkey.

"But the number of people decreased. It was partially due to underestimating the development speed of the other worlds' civilizations, but Lord Cronus shouted

from his cell claiming that ‘you shouldn’t do it within the family!’. However, it was mostly due to people dying in the war.”

As Miyako tried to decide what about that to take issue with, the next board was revealed.

“It all came to a head when the ninth world destroyed one of our continents. ‘Take this! Suicide bomber of rage!’ Kaboom! Kaboom!”



"Wait. The way you're saying that doesn't match the detail of this drawing! People are being blown up!"

"We divided up the work and each drew one, but Moira 2nd is a really good artist."

The next board showed Zeus and several other people.

"The war dragged on and the people stopped being able to have children for some reason. Whether due to a limit of the species or just pathetic individuals, the number of men and women who could have children greatly decreased. And the loss of a continent made the world begin to fall out of balance."

The next board showed Zeus sitting in a chair.

"The king was anguished. They tried cloning, but the technology must have been insufficient because the clones could not have children. The number of people continued to fall. Once not much more than his own family remained, the king made a decision."

"To do what?" asked Miyako.

After a moment, she gasped at what her question meant: she was growing interested in 3rd-Gear.

She looked up and saw Moira 1st smiling beyond the board. She flipped to the next one which showed a line of giant robots similar to the ones she had seen before.

"Those who could not have children transferred their concepts and wills to the Tartaros while their bodies joined with machines and fought. Those who could have children did whatever they could to give birth to people of their world in an attempt to ensure the continued existence of their world."

She flipped the board again and displayed a drawing of four men and women. One was Zeus, one was Cronus, and the other two were a young man and woman. The young pair both had long blond hair, but the man had yellow eyes and the woman had red eyes.

Neither of them had been in the hallway picture frames, but the man looked familiar.

…Huh?

He resembled the silhouette she had seen in the forest while looking down from the elevator.

But she did not recognize the woman at all.

The woman in the picture frame had had pale blue eyes.

All of them but Cronus had a robot behind them. Behind Zeus was a gray robot, behind the young man was a pale blue robot, and behind the woman was a silver robot.

“The few remaining people also became machines. Only four remained as humans: the king, his son Lord Apollo, Lady Rhea who served the king, and Lord Cronus who was imprisoned. And Lady Rhea carried the king’s child.”

Moira 1st continued speaking, but she spoke quietly as if testing her.

“It was known that Lady Rhea’s child would be a girl. If the child was able to have children, the king intended

to duplicate her with new clone technology being developed and then create a large number of people for their world."

When she heard that, something fell to the floor from Miyako's hand.

It was the cigarette gum she had been toying with in place of an actual cigarette.

But she did not even look down toward it.

"Wait."

Not even she was sure why she had spoken.

…This isn't good.

But despite her thought, she spoke in a quiet yet trembling voice.

"In other words, y-you mean the king…"

"What is it?" asked Moira 1st.

Miyako's mouth hung open and she felt the emotion that had caused her to drop the gum.

"So… Before this kid was even born, your king was thinking about using her as a sample for cloning?"

She did not want to hear the answer.

"Yes." Moira 1st gave a slight smile. "The child would be maintained at a young state in a preservation tank. Her growth would be stopped at a stage when she retained great possibility for growth, cells would be extracted, and the stasis would be removed to allow her to grow."

"Stop!" shouted Miyako.

She recalled her job interview from the previous day. How had the interviewers viewed her then?

…Like a faceless member of a crowd or like a lifeless part of a machine.

She felt that interpretation was showing a bit of a persecution complex, so she stood up from the bed to wipe the thoughts from her mind.

"That Rhea woman's kid was the king's kid, right!? It was his own kid, wasn't it!? How could he ignore the kid 's will and…try all that bullshit!"

"It is not 'bullshit'," declared Moira 1st.

Her words threatened to tear Miyako's feelings to pieces, but that was stopped by Moira 1st's own smile and dignified voice.

"An entire world was on the verge of destruction. There were only two options: try every means available to survive or give up and be destroyed."

Moira 1st asked a quiet but clear question.

"Have you ever tried to choose the former or been faced with someone who did, princess?"

A certain underground space did not feel dark and sealed off. That underground maintenance area made full use of its excavated free space.

The concrete floor measured several hundred meters in all four directions and it was filled with people, light, and sounds.

The wall displayed the UCAT logo and said Kanda Laboratory in a black Gothic typeface.

Unlike UCAT in Okutama, the vast underground space was divided into research blocks with partitions. Each large partition had various objects and noises within.

“This first basement is primarily used for god of war research. The second basement is used for research on concept space production theory.”

While surrounded by the sounds of grinders and smells of welding, Sayama and Shinjou walked down the center path between partitions. An automaton in a maid uniform walked ahead of them.

The maid, #4, had sent a different maid to retrieve Georgius’s examination device with Tsukuyomi while she showed the two of them around. As they walked, she described the destruction of 3rd-Gear.

“Lord Zeus chose the path of survival no matter what.” She looked back toward them with an expressionless look below her short blonde hair. “Do you now understand what 3rd-Gear’s impurity is?”

Sayama saw Shinjou nod next to him.

She embraced her binder as if relying on it and paled a bit.

…Treating humans like tools is a difficult topic for her.

And so he took the initiative and spoke.

"Is this what you are trying to say? To survive the Concept War, 3rd-Gear did not treat its own people as human in those intra-family marriages and human modifications."

"I do not know how exactly you are picturing the situation, but that is what happened. At the time, 3rd-Gear was the Gear with the greatest technology in such things." She closed her eyes. "What you just mentioned was one of the methods used in the initial stage. Almost everyone but the nobles was treated that way. Most of those who disobeyed were sent to the Tartaros Machina, the empty shell of their body had the organs extracted, and the remaining parts were fixed inside a god of war. Once a temporary will was attached, the god of war was sent out to battle."

"I believe a portion of that requires correcting. It was not just "most" of those who disobeyed, was it?" asked Sayama. "For the Gear to be destroyed, more than half the Concept Core had to be lost. But weren't 3rd-Gear's concepts held by each individual resident? To lose over half the core, more than half the residents would have to be sent to the Tartaros, bringing the core together into one mass."

He heard Shinjou gasp.

But he went on to speak the truth she had realized.

"3rd-Gear's king took almost all of the residents' lives and sent them to the Tartaros, didn't he?"

"Testament. That is correct."

And…

"But can you say anything more concerning 3rd-Gear's actions?"

"Of course," answered Sayama with slight laugh.

…That is a simple matter.

"Someone who is willing to do anything to survive would never limit himself to his own Gear. 3rd-Gear had to have reached for other Gears. They must have abducted people, taken them apart, modified them, and used them as tools for their own survival. Am I wrong?"

"Testament. Then do you understand the meaning of 3rd-Gear's impurity?"

"They are the Gear that violated a great taboo and committed a holocaust in which they did not view people as human."

#4 nodded and lowered her gaze slightly.

"This fact is known at least by the Gears higher than 3rd. Especially 9th which directly fought 3rd. And at the time, 3rd-Gear was known as 'the Gear of fighting and pleasure'. Fighting referred to the gods of war and pleasure sarcastically referred to the forced production of children." She closed her eyes. "But if Team Leviathan accepts 3rd-Gear to their side, it will mean accepting its past crimes. The people of our Gear were treated as tools and people of other Gears were treated the same. At the time, the people fighting 3rd-Gear knew some of their own relatives were being used as parts for the gods of

war and automatons, so they took the initiative to destroy them."

"But it was Low-Gear that ultimately did so?"

"Testament. I have heard that some people praise Low-Gear for that destruction. But what will they say if Team Leviathan now accepts 3rd-Gear?"

"In other words, we will receive the resentment of the other Gears?"

"Testament. The disturbing act of killing all of the Gear's residents and the cruel act of desiring other Gears' residents as parts has left a shadow of mistrust around 3rd-Gear. The Leviathan Road cannot be carried out without cleansing that impurity."

"Cleansing the impurity, hm?"

Sayama thought about the impurity Hiba had mentioned and the conclusion the boy sought.

…Why did he say he would cleanse the impurity?

What would he do to completely cleanse the crimes that were something like the parting gift of a destroyed Gear?

Sayama spoke the answer he arrived at.

“There are survivors of 3rd-Gear, aren’t there? And the fight is not yet over, is it? The fight between 3rd-Gear’s desire to live on and Hiba’s wish to cleanse that impurity still continues.”

“Testament. Did you see the beginning of that fight?” #4’s words filled the air. “Did you see Lady Rhea who fled to Low-Gear out of dislike of that impurity?”

Moira 1st was not finished speaking.

“In their desperation to survive, they grew impure.”

With strength in her shoulders, Miyako let out a breath .

“Your king used any means necessary and he stopped treating people as human.”

She could not accept it, but she wondered what she would do if she were the leader. And what if she had been a resident of 3rd-Gear when the king had told her she was powerless.

…What would I have done?

She recalled the rest of her interview from the day before.

She was always shouting loudly and with an air of importance, but she had been unable to say anything to the decision the interviewer had made upon seeing her resume.

…He said there was nothing I could do for their company.

According to Moira 1st, those in 3rd-Gear who could not have children had been forcibly joined with machines known as gods of war.

Compared to a world where someone who could do nothing was sent to the Tartaros, her situation seemed almost carefree.

…But I'm still not being viewed as a human being.

She felt they were wrong, but she was not confident she had the ability to prove it.

What could one do?

"What can you do?"

"Eh?"

Moira 1st's voice made Miyako realize she had spoken her question aloud.

She looked up and saw the maid smiling at her.

Pathetic, she honestly judged herself and grew flustered. *Ah, this isn't good.*

"U-um, isn't there anything you can do when someone that stupid rules above you?"

"Yes. That is why there was one person who did not choose that method."

With a smile, Moira 1st flipped to the next board. It showed a silver robot in a vast darkness. The slender craft looked feminine.

"Lady Rhea betrayed them."

"Eh?"

Moira 1st nodded at Miyako's confusion and looked to the back of the board.

"When it was decided that Lady Rhea's child would be taken, she fled to another world. She fled to the weakest and lowest world that no one had paid much attention to . She felt she would be safe there."

The lowest world.

In the preliminary explanations, Miyako had been told that was this world.

"…"

She suddenly sat back down on the bed.

Her entire body went limp when she saw the image before her and heard Moira 1st's words.

Why? she asked the silver robot in the picture, but it did not respond.

But the lack of an answer did not make the question disappear.

…Why did you choose this place?

But that was not the real question.

…Why did you choose to act?

Why had she been able to so fully trust her desire to reject the situation?

Naturally, she received no answer to her questions.

She simply listened to Moira 1st provide the sound of the silver robot leaving.

“Vwoosh!”

“Please stop providing sound effects.”

Miyako sighed, raised one knee, and looked at the board that Moira 1st flipped to.

The look in her eyes was much more serious now.

In the underground space, a maid walked through the maintenance and research space.

The sounds of welding and grinding formed the background noise behind her voice.

“In her dislike of the impurity, Lady Rhea travelled to Low-Gear. After her defection, Lord Zeus formed an alliance with 9th-Gear.”

Sayama and Shinjou listened as they walked behind her.

And Sayama asked about the fact just mentioned.

“He formed an alliance with the Gear that had attempted to destroy his world?”

“It is not an unlikely decision during a war, so allow me to continue. Lord Zeus decided to recover Lady Rhea’s child, enter the Tartaros himself, leave the rest to Lord Apollo, and prepare a god of war with a copy of his thoughts to act as an advisor.”

“And…what happened then?” asked Shinjou with a very bad feeling about the answer.

#4 nodded quietly and answered.

"Lord Zeus intended to have Lord Apollo begin an invasion against all the other Gears. On Lord Zeus's orders, Lord Cronus had already created the base of Typhon, the strongest god of war, and he had developed Keravnos as its weapon of destruction. They both contained the Concept Core."

"Eh?"

Shinjou thought about what #4 had just said.

Her casual comment had contained two pieces of information. First, it revealed that the missing half of the Concept Core was contained within the weapon named Keravnos. And second…

…If Typhon was made as an invasion weapon…

"If Typhon left 3rd-Gear with half the Concept Core in itself and half in Keravnos, 3rd-Gear would be completely destroyed."

"That was not a problem. 3rd-Gear intended to abandon its own Gear."

After stopping, #4 swung her right arm and lightly pointed at the floor. She was pointing at the world itself.

And she smiled.

"Lord Zeus intended to create a new foothold here in Low-Gear, the Gear that had been abandoned and ignored by the other Gears due to its lack of concepts."

Shinjou gulped and #4 continued speaking.

"Meanwhile, there were a few misunderstandings between the people of Low-Gear and Lady Rhea, but a certain incident led them to work together. Namely, Lady Rhea's child was born."

"What happened to that child?"

But #4 did not answer Shinjou's question.

She silently turned her back and began to walk once more. She was headed toward a large metal door on one end of the floor.

…Is that something she doesn't want to tell us?

Shinjou had seen Rhea in the past, so she had given it a bit of thought.

And so she asked a tentative question to the back leading her to the large door.

“The people of 3rd-Gear have long lives, right? If that 3rd-Gear child were still alive now, how much would they have grown?”

“It has only been sixty years, so a 3rd-Gear human would still be a very young child.”

“I see…”

Shinjou nodded at that brief answer and continued walking.

And she thought about Mikage.

She thought about the female automaton who had exited the black god of war and been held by Hiba the night before. That girl was with Hiba who was at the center of the incident.

They had assumed she supported him as he piloted the god of war.

…But something bothers me.

Her imagination led her to a possibility they had not considered.

And she thought about it.

…What if she doesn't stand on the sidelines? What if she stands in the center of it all?

And…

…What if Ryuuji-kun is with her in order to protect her?

Just like she and Sayama stood on the battlefield together.

In that case, what made her so important?

…Rhea-san's child.

She continued thinking on this leap of logic for a while .

"…"

But she shook her head and gathered her thoughts.

Mikage was an automaton. She was not human.

And she had responded calmly to Hiba using the black god of war's mouth. That response had been based in the kind of thought not present in a child as young as #4 had mentioned.

She was not a human and she was not a young child, so Shinjou had two means of denying the possibility.

But a sudden thought reached her.

…Huh?

It concerned the name Mikage.

She had heard that name before the previous night and it had been fairly recently.

…Where was it?

Her thoughts were cut off by a question from #4.

"Do you have a question for me?"

While walking, #4 looked toward Shinjou. In the corner of her vision, she saw her fellow automatons using gravitational techniques to carry tools and materials beyond the partitions on either side.

…Be quiet.

After giving that command over their shared memory, she waited for Shinjou to speak.

Shinjou held a black binder next to the boy with the surname Sayama.

"U-um?" She regulated her breathing and spoke. "Um ? Last night, we met someone named Hiba who said he would cleanse 3rd-Gear's impurity. But now that I know the history of 3rd-Gear, it sounds like you would need a certain right to cleanse the impurity. For example, Rhea-san fled to the National Defense Department due to her dislike of the impurity, so Low-Gear has a justification for getting involved in 3rd-Gear's affairs."

"I see," said #4 with a nod.

She found it interesting that Shinjou was bringing up an issue of rights.

How would she go from there to draw out further information?

“Please continue.”

Shinjou nodded and brought a hand to her chest over the binder.

“What right does this Hiba Ryuuji-kun have? There is of course the fact that his grandfather destroyed 3rd-Gear , but if there is another reason, what is it?”

She lowered the hand on her chest and held her own body as if trying to support it.

Based on that action, #4 estimated her skeletal structure. She looked male, but there was also a strong possibility she was female.

While she gathered data on her, Shinjou spoke while choosing her words carefully.

“If there is something more, the person with Ryuuji-kun must be in a similar position to Rhea-san or

at least dislike 3rd-Gear's impurity. That person looks like an automaton, but what if that person became like that for some reason or another?"

…I see.

"That is speculation," said #4 before Shinjou could say anything further.

Shinjou wanted to know about the automaton who had been with the boy of the Hiba family.

#4 could tell her, but she decided to test her first. Would she pick up on the hint #4 was about to give her?

With no expression on her face, #4 tilted her head and asked a question.

"If I may ask, why do you think she is a human?"

She saw the answer to her question in the change to Shinjou's expression.

…Has she noticed it?

While still expressionless, she saw Shinjou smile ever so slightly. It was a relieved smiled.

"That question was a test, wasn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"It was too obvious. You asked me why I think she is human. But…"

#4 received her answer.

"I never once said that person was a she."

Shinjou took a breath to relieve her tension. She then tilted her head toward #4.

"You know about the automaton I was talking about, don't you? You were thinking about Mikage-san, weren't you?"

Her question flew directly toward #4.

But…

"…"

#4 brushed up her bangs to create a period of silence and let out a breath toward the floor.

As her breath dissolved into the floor, she turned her expressionless eyes toward Shinjou.

"You said this person was with a boy named ' Ryuuji-kun', so I assumed she was female. That is a perfectly natural assumption. It is no different from the two of you being together."

Sayama immediately responded to that.

"Sorry, #4-kun. Shinjou-kun is a boy right now."

His comment made #4 quickly look back toward Shinjou.

It was possible the truth about her had not left the Okutama UCAT.

…Come to think of it, there's no need for anyone else to know because I won't be working with them.

With a mental nod of understanding, she looked down at her own body.

She wore the school's summer uniform and she had Setsu's male body.

"Do I really look like a girl? …D-do you want to check ?"

"Shinjou-kun, there is no reason to force yourself."

"No, I was just interested that an automaton could be wrong about this kind of thing."

"Hm. Then look closely, #4-kun. I will support Shinjou-kun's courage."

When her belt was suddenly removed from behind, she frantically jabbed her elbow backwards.

"Gh… Wh-what are you doing, Shinjou-kun? That came out of nowhere."

"Stop trying to act so surprised. …Oh, sorry about the commotion, #4-san."

"Do not worry. This is not an impossible turn of events ."

"Yet you were unable to predict this possible turn of events. Shinjou-kun, that means you win this round."

"I'm not sure if that's a good thing…"

As Shinjou's shoulders drooped, #4 turned toward her.

"At any rate, let us get back to this Mikage you mentioned earlier. If you wish to prove that she is Lady Rhea's child, you must clarify her origin at least to a certain extent. Do you have any proof that this Mikage existed sixty years ago?'

"I do."

Shinjou nodded without hesitation.

The phrase "sixty years ago" had helped her remember.

…That's where I heard the name Mikage.

She had heard it only about two months before. The past she had received in order to fight had given her the answer.

"When 2nd-Gear's Yamata was sealed, Susaou's control device had a strange bed-like device in it. The creator of that control system called it the 'Mikage format '. An automaton named Mikage must have laid there."

"But that does not prove she is Lady Rhea's child."

"No, it doesn't," said Shinjou.

She had no proof of that. That was a fact. But…

"But proof of that is what we will work to find now. Why was Rhea-san's child made into an automaton after Rhea-san fled to Low-Gear? Why has she grown so much in only sixty years if she is a 3rd-Gear human? I want to find the answers. Is that wrong?"

A clear change came over #4 when she heard that.

Her expressionless look changed to a different expressionless look.

…Eh?

Shinjou did not understand. She could not tell what that expression meant.

It was a small change that could barely be described, but Shinjou tried.

…Is that…kindness?

There was no hint of tension. Shinjou thought it was a perfectly natural expression and she quickly realized how the automaton had made it.

…It's the angle of her head.

The actual expressionless look had not changed, but the way she had raised her head to look at Shinjou head on had made it look like she was smiling just a bit.

Shinjou felt it was an expression only an automaton could make.

…She is truly facing me.

And #4 opened her mouth as if to respond to that feeling.

"Will you not abandon your interest in 3rd-Gear no matter what?"

"Does it look like we will?" asked Sayama.

He reached out a hand and took the hand Shinjou wore her ring on.

He took a half step forward before continuing.

“The rest is my job, Shinjou-kun. So let me ask this, #4-kun. Does it look like we are withdrawing from the impurity you have described to us? If not, then test us to see whether we can cleanse it or not.”

“Test you?”

“We have fought our way through a few battles. However, we have not gained any combat ability to face automatons or the gods who control gods of war as their own bodies. Is the object we have come here to retrieve something that will fill that gap? I assume the old man has planned to provide us with some power.” He took a breath. “The other automatons have already tested us, but you have not. And after accepting that power, there is more I wish to ask about. That will of course include the automaton named Mikage, but it also relates to the 3rd-Gear survivors.”

He held Shinjou’s right hand in his left such that half of its back was showing and he squeezed her hand.

She squeezed back to strongly provide her answer.

The skin of their hands twisted and they heard #4 speak.

"I see. Then I shall test you. But let me say one thing first."

"And what is that?"

"The further answers you seek are answers we seek as well. How was 3rd-Gear destroyed? How is the main force doing? By the time we noticed, the destruction of the world had already begun and we could do no more than escape through the gates created in various places."

She lowered the ends of her eyebrows in a look of regret.

"All we know about the time leading up to the day of that final battle is that Lady Rhea's child was retrieved, that Lord Zeus left behind a god of war with his will copied into it, and that Lord Zeus sent Lord Cronus to the Tartaros at the same time as sending himself. And when the final battle occurred, the only ones in 3rd-Gear's central temple were Lord Apollo and Lady Mikage."

"Then this main force you speak of must be led by that Apollo. Do you have any questions about that?"

"Testament. Unlike Lord Zeus, Lord Apollo was a pacifist."

It took Shinjou a moment to understand what she had just heard.

…3rd-Gear's next king was a pacifist?

And she had a thought: if that person was still alive, wouldn't the Leviathan Road be possible?

After a few seconds, #4 resumed speaking.

"He hated 3rd-Gear. When it became clear his younger sister Artemis could not have children, he refused to send her to the Tartaros to the point of creating a conflict with Lord Zeus. If the Leviathan Road were presented to him, he would gladly accept. He was not the type to send out gods of war to fight."

#4 hung her head.

Shinjou thought about this man named Apollo who she had never seen.

…These automatons really trust him.

And so she asked a question.

"Then is this your question? The main force is supposedly led by Apollo, a pacifist, so why are they hiding and hoping for a fight?"

"Testament. And there is one other question. Last night, we received word that Typhon abducted someone, but why would Lord Apollo pilot Typhon and do something like that? It is true that was made to be his personal god of war." She shook her head. "But his previous god of war was created with Lady Artemis's body. As an example to Lord Apollo and Lord Cronus, Lord Zeus sent Lady Artemis's will to the Tartaros Machina and used the remaining body as parts."

Shinjou was at a loss for words and #4 shook her head slightly.

"Feeling responsible for what happened to his sister, Lord Apollo declared it his own personal god of war so as to never let her slip from his grasp again."

"Are you sure it was not destroyed during the final battle?"

"When a god of war is destroyed, the pilot dies. As long as Lord Apollo lives, Lady Artemis's pale blue god of war remains." She took a breath. "Please seek out the answers. There must be a reason. There must be a second impurity that exceeds the impurity we know of. Lord Cronus created four types of automatons. Three were the combat oriented Hecatoncheires who protect Typhon and act as bodyguards. The fourth was the three Moirai created to manipulate and manage people's memories and the mass-produced models like us. Those automatons must be fighting for the sake of an impurity we are not aware of."

#4 then looked ahead toward the wall.

The wall contained a giant metal door.

She hurried a few steps forward and turned around with perfectly silent footsteps.

"The power we have for you lies within here. That power will help you find all the answers. But I must give you a test before I can grant you that power."

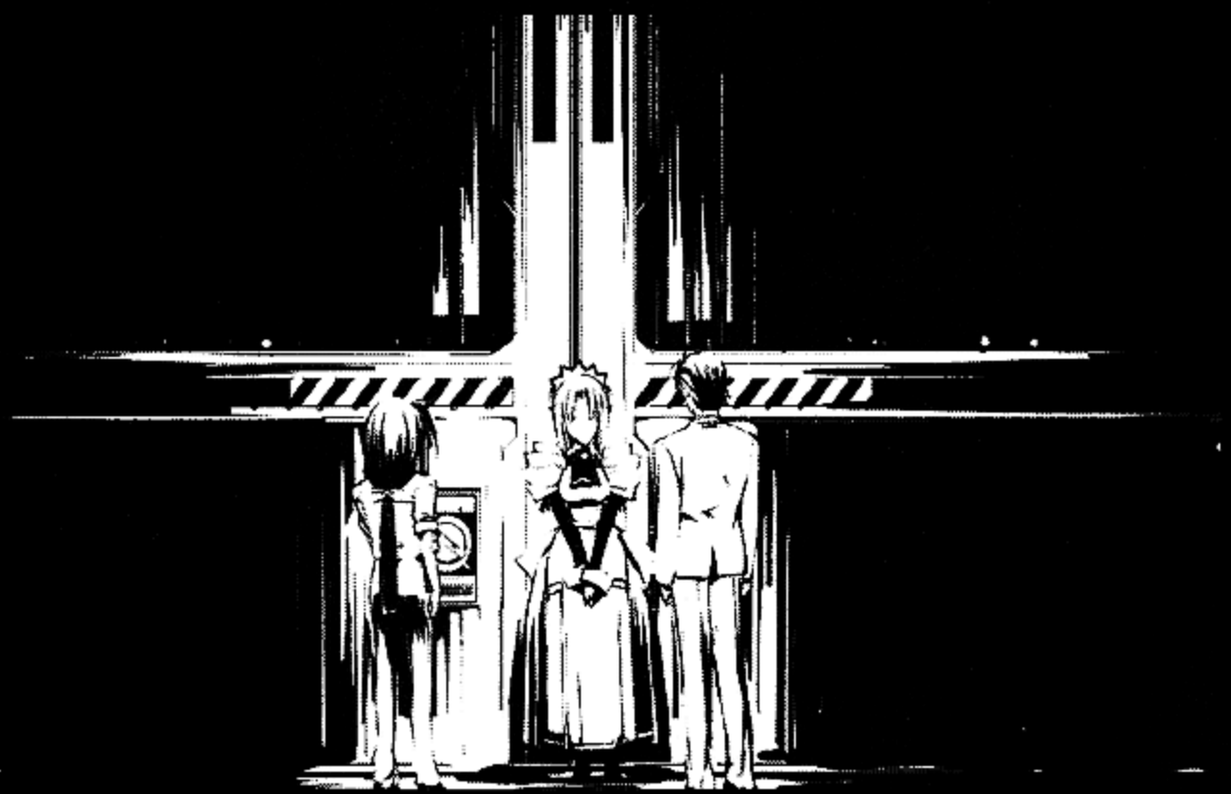
"I see. And what is this test?"

"Well," said #4. "I will test your intentions."

Chapter 7: Painful Guard

Chapter 7

“Painful Guard”



Why do flowers wither?
Why do they not stay in bloom forever?

Why do flowers wither?

Why do they not stay in bloom forever?

A wall contained a giant metal door.

The basement of the Kanda Laboratory was filled with the scent of sparks and the sounds of welding and grinding metal. A cargo corridor on one end of the floor led to a metal sliding door at least eight meters wide and four meters tall.

Three people stood before that double door.

The automaton named #4 was leading Sayama and Shinjou.

Behind Sayama and Shinjou was the laboratory work space where a large number of people and automatons worked.

In front of them, #4 stood before the bulkhead door and her legs were placed slightly apart as if to stop the other two's path.

She had a smile on her face.

"Now, let us begin the test."

She spread her arms behind her and grasped the bulkhead's locks.

Her gaze remained fixed on the other two.

"If you do not provide the proper answer, please leave . What lies beyond here is the embodiment of our great grudge. I will determine whether you can have it."

"D-determine? What are you going to ask?"

Shinjou's concerned question only received a smile from #4.

And so Sayama took a step forward.

"They are hoping for a villain, Shinjou-kun. A wonderful villain who is willing to reach for their impurity. …You would be unable to answer."

"Testament," said #4 quietly with a nod. "I have a single question. The people of 3rd-Gear had long lives, they corresponded to legends of this world, and their

culture truly could control the weather, control heavenly bodies, and use giant gods of war as weapons."

"You may be saying they were like gods, but it sounds like they were closer to being demons."

"Testament." #4 did not deny it and she slowly continued. "If you continue with this Leviathan Road, you will be fighting those demons and then accepting them to your side. But if you oppose and ally with those nigh almighty demons, it will cause the other Gears to avoid you. As the representative of your world, what do you think of such an action?"

"I see." Sayama nodded. He had only one answer. "A worthless question."

Sayama raised his left arm lightly yet still forcefully enough to produce a sound from the sleeve's elbow.

The sound of snapping cloth rang loudly.

As if that were a sign, the sounds of work behind him slowly faded.

He could tell they were all turning toward him. He could sense them growing still and listening carefully.

Before him, #4 stood motionlessly with her arms spread to protect the door.

Silence ruled all.

But in the strained atmosphere of that silence, Sayama slowly lowered his arm.

And he began to speak.

“You wish to know what I think about opposing and subduing demons? Let me say it again: a worthless question.”

“Really? This is no different from inviting a murderer into your family. You may see no problem, but what about the rest of your family?”

#4’s gaze turned to the left where Shinjou stood.

She returned #4’s gaze and then turned toward Sayama. The ends of her eyebrows were lowered and she was attempting and failing to force a smile.

"U-um, Sayama-kun? How about you look at this politically? This may not be my place to speak, but people in the other Gears had family members killed by 3rd-Gear. And not in war. They were abducted and killed for experiments."

"If you ally with them, you will likely need some form of compensation for such people."

I see, thought Sayama. *This question is indeed looking at the later negotiations with the other Gears. But…*

"Do you really think I had not given that any thought, Shinjou-kun?"

Shinjou's expression changed. Her eyebrows rose and she looked up.

"Y-you really thought about it, Sayama-kun?"

"Ha ha ha. I have of course given it no thought whatsoever."

"Eh?"

Shinjou's expression froze over.

The atmosphere from those behind him hardened and all expression vanished from #4's face.

But Sayama readily spoke to the surrounding atmosphere that had lost all emotion.

"Why would I need to think about that again now?"

He raised his left arm once more. With a snap of the sleeve, he brushed a hand through his hair.

"In this Leviathan Road, we must negotiate with 3rd-Gear and bring them to our side. That has nothing to do with the other Gears. Why must we listen to what the other Gears have to say? The whole world is equally under our rule."

"But…"

Shinjou was at a loss for words, so #4 spoke in her stead.

"Are you saying Low-Gear stands above all other Gears and will rule them? Is that how you view the Leviathan Road?"

"Make no mistake," he said. "Bringing all other Gears to one's side is something no other Gear could manage. Doing so requires bringing all Gears except Low-Gear to the same level. In other words, completing the Leviathan Road will automatically set Low-Gear above the other Gears. …And once I gather every Gear in that fashion, there is one thing I plan to say to them."

"Which is?"

Sayama answered #4's question without hesitation.

"Low-Gear stands above you, so now bring us to your side."

"…"

"I do not know how it will happen, when it will happen, or even if the Leviathan Road will ever end. But if they do that, all will be equal. In exchange for bringing the other Gears to our side, Low-Gear will take responsibility for all their negative aspects and it will fall. And that will be the end of it."

#4 listened to the boy standing before her.

The others peering over the partitions were just as motionless as her.

…Bring Low-Gear to their side?

Sayama spoke as if to answer her question.

"#4-kun, you asked what I thought about opposing and subduing those demons or gods. But make no mistake. Demon and god are nothing more than a classification of race. Even if they have greater abilities, they are the same as you and your fellow automatons. What is there to be afraid of?"

"Even if the difference in ability is like that between an ant and a human?"

"If I saw them next to a bar, I would tap them on the shoulder and treat them to a drink."

Sayama lowered his raised left arm and asked her a question.

"What is a demon or a god? One who tempts people and causes them to fall? An omniscient and omnipotent

ruler? That demon or god is nothing more than an individual that uses the power to do those things."

He let out a bitter smile. It was likely directed at what he himself was saying.

That smile gave #4 a sudden sense of nostalgia.

She had once seen someone give that same smile.

And so she asked a question.

"And what do you intend to do with those individuals ?"

"Well, if I find someone who is being feared or worshiped as a demon or god like that, I will knock them to the ground to wake them up. I will show them that there are more enjoyable things in the world. Yes, they would enjoy life a lot more if they cast aside their corruption or almightiness and gave it to all of you instead."

"To…us?"

"You serve people, do you not?" he said. "The demons or gods can leave their omniscience and omnipotence

with all of you and they can become human. Is that not a wonderful thing? You will be able to serve people without feeling any limit to your abilities. Also, demons and gods are created through belief. In other words, they are artificial. In which case, there can be no objection to making artificial creations such as you into them."

His words brought a sudden change to #4's expression .

A certain function activated. Her chain of thoughts chose a certain reaction from her emotional functionality.

She laughed. A small giggle escaped her lips.

"Testament. I apologize for that. I rarely use that function."

"Then this was a good chance to inspect the function." Sayama held his lowered left hand toward her and spoke directly to her. "Now, take this hand and use the other hand to open the door behind you. That is your job. Take pride in it, automaton. We will receive that which lies on the other side, investigate a past you are unaware of, and head out to fight. …And it is all to bring those mistaken demons or gods out drinking with us."

"With you?"

"That is what we are here for. The party is sure to be lively. The misunderstandings of each Gear will be gathered together and you will be our waitresses. Although I would like for you to sit and laugh with us if possible."

"Is that so?" #4 nodded. "I have determined that is certain to be enjoyable."

Another function activated. This one created a smile. She determined that this was valuable as she rarely used the function, but she also determined that it was somehow not very machine-like.

Her smile may have been a reaction from her emotional functionality. Heat gathered in her cheeks and softness filled her eyes.

She did not understand it, but she lowered her head slightly because she did not want anyone aside from Sayama to see the smile.

An old record revived in her brain.

Ten years before, someone had caused her to use the exact same function and that person had often spoken of a certain boy. He had said the boy lacked a lot, but he had always smiled while speaking of him.

That person had died recently and a certain question had filled her mind in his place.

…What kind of person did that boy become?

終わりのクロニクル

She wondered what kind of smile was on her lips.

And she closed her eyes before speaking.

“Welcome to the entrance to 3rd-Gear’s question, Sayama Mikoto-sama.”

A pause followed #4’s words.

But Sayama did not try to hurry her. He did not hold his hand out any further and he did not speak.

And #4 remained motionless as she faced him. Her arms were still spread behind her and she was still smiling.

Her head was still turned slightly downward and her eyes were still closed.

“…”

The silence lasted a few breaths until it was broken by movement.

But that movement was not made by #4. Nor was it made by Sayama or Shinjou.

Several short figures arrived from behind Sayama as he held out his hand.

They were automatons.

Several dozen automatons slowly surrounded them. A few moved forward toward the bulkhead door.

As Sayama frowned in confusion, Shinjou trembled slightly to his right.

She was looking ahead toward #4 who was surrounded by a few automatons.

"She…"

Her voice turned Sayama's attention toward #4 as well .

"…isn't moving?"

#4 was indeed not moving.

Even the slight movements of a doll had vanished, so she had frozen in place as if her entire body had hardened over.

The hands touching the door, her leading feet, her head she had tilted a few times, and her expression were all perfectly motionless.

She had stopped all of her functions as an automaton and she would never move again.

“Wh-why?”

Shinjou’s almost self-questioning shout served as a reminder of just how silent their surroundings were. One of the automatons standing around #4 turned toward them.

It was #8. Her red hair swayed as she shook her head. She was saying #4 would not move again.

“#8-kun, you said that my arrival would harm one of your fellow automatons.”

“Testament.”

"Why is that? Why did #4-kun harm herself?"

As he asked, Sayama placed his right hand on the left side of his chest.

A slight pain acted as a prelude as #8 faced him and spoke expressionlessly yet quietly.

"When we took control of this place ten years ago, #4 handled the negotiations. She prepared the plan to defect by betraying 3rd-Gear and she planned to take responsibility for our betrayal with her own self-destruction, but she was stopped."

"Who stopped this doll from destroying herself and how?"

"Testament. She was given a duty. She was made to serve a certain individual. And that duty has now ended by allowing you passage."

"Was the one who gave her that duty who I think it was?" asked Shinjou.

It was Sayama who answered.

"My grandfather."

"Testament. #4 just asked you a question, did she not? Your grandfather once answered the same question. Afterwards, he asked #4 to protect that which had been sealed within here since just after the end of the Concept War. He left her with what they had kept sealed for fifty years. And he told her to only allow passage to one she approved of."

Sayama felt pain.

He swallowed a groan and Shinjou embraced him from the right.

The warmth and softness he felt through his clothes was enough for him to control his breathing.

"…"

He would be fine. His forehead felt damp, but the tension left him.

"I am fine, Shinjou-kun."

He removed his weak right hand from his chest and pulled Shinjou close.

"Nn," she groaned as she leaned in and supported him .

He stood tall once more and faced forward.

There he saw a door and a now unmoving automaton standing before it.

"…"

Everyone remained silent.

In the still air, he moved away from Shinjou and approached #4. As he did, someone spoke.

It was the red-haired automaton standing next to #4.

"Your grandfather would occasionally come here to suggest that she take on a new master once her duty was finished. However, she refused to stray from her own decision." She tilted her head. "Why was that? Humans possess hearts, so do you understand?"

"I only understand one ridiculous truth here: she had terrible taste in people."

"Testament. Your grandfather said the same thing."

"Is that so?" Sayama endured a slight throbbing in his chest. "How did my grandfather respond to the question she asked him in their negotiations?"

"You would have to ask #4 as she is the one who heard the answers of both those with the name Sayama."

#4's skin was as hard as a doll and no longer moving.

However, one thing could be seen on her lips: a smile.

That unmoving smile remained.

While focusing on that, Sayama brought his hand to his chest once more.

"I thank you." He took a breath and looked at her with no expression of his own. "But unfortunately, it seems you cannot take my hand and open the door yourself."

As he spoke, he realized why she had not taken his hand.

The hands held behind her were placed on the door's locks.

But her fingers were no longer holding the locks.

The door had already opened.

…Come to think of it, she did say 'welcome'.

"You did an excellent job."

Sayama raised his left hand and let out a shout toward the automatons to either side and behind him.

"Let us open the door."

"Testament!"

As the automatons nodded, Sayama stepped forward.

He raised his hands above #4's head and placed his fingers in the gap between the two sides of the bulkhead door.

The question of whether it would open vanished from his mind in an instant.

The automatons were not touching the door.

…If these well-made automatons are doing nothing, the door must already be ready to open.

He spread his arms to either side and the gate quickly slid fully open.

"!"

The metal gate roared across its rails and loudly crashed into the openings that held it while open.

Wind blew through. It was released from the area beyond the door and it was accompanied by light.

Sayama took a step back and looked.

As #4 stood with her arms spread, the wind whipped at her clothes and she was backlit by the light within.

She continued to smile and still did not move. And something stood beyond her.

The lights illuminated something atop a ten meter long cargo platform.

"A black god of war!"

It resembled the one they had seen the night before.

#8 spoke from the side after moving away from #4.

"This was built based on a 3rd-Gear god of war recovered during the Concept War. It is the only Low-Gear made god of war that can use philosopher's stones to function outside of concept spaces. It is the Susahito Custom. It has survived two almost complete destructions and one lesser destruction and it is a grim reaper of the past to 3rd-Gear!"

As he looked toward the metal figure referred to as a grim reaper, Sayama felt a tickle on his chest.

It was Baku.

From behind Sayama, Shinjou saw Baku climb up onto his shoulder.

…The past is coming.

She had experienced this more than once, so she could perfectly detect it in advance. All of her senses told her she was right. She was entering the past as nothing but sight.

The past revealing itself before her was in the early morning. The area was dim and rain was falling.

It appeared to be somewhere in the mountains. She was surrounded by the sounds of rain and the shadows of the mountain range, so all she could see clearly was what lay at her feet.

It was a twenty square meter area of empty land that had been cleared out.

The ground had been hardened by countless feet, but a large portion of the surface was cracked open.

It appeared to be a small battlefield.

…What is this?

The area was almost completely dark, but she could see two giant forms.

One was a black god of war standing on the cracked ground. Its right arm and the wings that said Susahito in white writing were broken. The armor panels of the torso were bent inwards into the chest.

The other was a silver god of war. It stood in front of the black one and its torso had been sliced apart. Both the top and the bottom of the split god of war were bent from great impacts and it had oil and lubricant leaking from the cut and other parts of its body.

Shinjou knew that damage to a god of war was returned to the pilot.

"Rhea-san was the one piloting that silver one."

Before she could think about the implications of that, she saw motion.

A man rose up from behind the black god of war.

The short young man was Hiba Ryuutetsu. He roughly wore an army uniform, his right arm hung down limply, and he dragged his legs forward through the rain. His right eye had been destroyed by what looked like a vertical slash of a blade and his left eye could not see clearly through the blood flowing from his head.

But his single eye could see the two giant figures standing even further in front of him.

“A gray god of war and a pale blue god of war!”

Two gods of war even larger than the black and silver ones stood in the darkness.

One was gray and the other was pale blue. They both had four wings spread, but the gray one’s right hand held a sword covered in black oil and its left hand held a certain noise.

It was the crying of a baby.

The crying left the gray giant’s left palm and filled the rainy sky.

Shinjou’s vision saw a red-eyed baby shedding tears within baby clothes made by sewing together scraps of cloth.

Its long, intermittent crying caused Ryuutetsu to move forward.

He held his unmoving right arm with his left hand and he looked up at the gray and pale blue gods of war.

“Is that… Is that your answer!?”

The gray god of war did not answer with words. The pale blue one merely looked up at the gray one slightly.

It seemed to be asking the other one something.

The gray one then moved as if giving an answer. It raised the sword in its right hand.

“…!”

And it sliced the sword through the wind and toward Ryuutetsu.

At the same time, the silver god of war collapsed in front of Ryuutetsu moved. Only the severed upper half of the body swung up its right arm like a living being.

A clear sound brought destruction. Everything past the silver one’s right elbow burst as the blade struck it. But the silver upper body suddenly leaped up and crashed into the gray one.

Needless to say, it did not move any more than that.

The ground shook and muddy water splattered around as the silver god of war fell back to the ground. Ryuutetsu shouted toward it through the rain with a voice that was near tears.

“Rhea!”

There was no response. But the gray god of war did look down at the silver god of war at its feet.

After that quick glance, it stared at the silver god of war’s oil on its gray fingers.

“_____”

It produced a noise halfway between a groaning machine and a sigh.

Meanwhile, darkness appeared behind the gray and pale blue gods of war. It was a deep darkness. Unlike the darkness already surrounding them, this darkness seemed to solidify. It spread out in an instant as if to envelop the gray god of war.

It was a gate.

The gray god of war held up the crying voice in its left hand and sank into the gate.

Having completed what it came to do, it returned to 3rd-Gear without even a parting glance toward Ryuutetsu.

Next, the pale blue god of war turned its back, but it stopped for a moment.

“_____”

It said something.

And then its giant form vanished in a gust of wind.

All that remained were the broken ground, the two destroyed gods of war, and Ryuutetsu.

He sat on his knees below the early morning sky. His head hung down, he bent forward, and he let out a moan .

Shinjou tried to close her ears to the cries of agony, but she could not.

“I won’t forgive you…”

His shout changed to crying, but the past quickly came to its end. She could not shut off her vision, but it now grew dark as if to say she had seen what she was meant to see.

And then the past switched out.

…Eh?

It did not come to an end. There was more. The next scene began as if to say there was more for her to see.

Rather than fading to black, the world changed as if she were moving.

The second past that revealed itself to Sayama was a dim warehouse wrapped in fog.

His first impression of the large warehouse was that it was old. But not because it was outdated. It was worn out from plenty of use.

The warehouse had no windows or doors and its floor was plain concrete. The concrete floor had been scraped

away by great weights passing over it, so very little of it was flat anymore.

What resembled a large mountain sat in the center of the warehouse floor.

That mountain sank deeply within the darkness and fog.

But a certain form was visible in the early morning warehouse.

It was the wreckage of two gods of war. One was silver and the other black. The silver one had been sliced in two through the torso and its limbs had been crushed. However, the black one was almost undamaged save the smashed torso and right arm.

Also, three human figures appeared from behind the two gods of war.

The one in the lead walked along while checking the condition of the gods of war.

Sayama recognized him.

“Ooshiro Hiromasa.”

The one who averted his gaze from the gods of war was Hiba Ryuutetsu.

One eye and one arm were wrapped in bandages.

He looked silently behind him where an old man walked up. He wore a white cloak, his back was bent, and his gray hair and gray beard hung forward to the same length.

He walked slowly, but Sayama saw strength in his eyes.

The man stared at the two gods of war and suddenly stopped walking.

“Very interesting inventions.”

Another language could be heard on top of his words.

As Sayama wondered who he was, Hiromasa stopped walking and turned back.

“Thank you very much. It means a lot to hear that from the leading member of the god of war homeworld, King Cronus.”

"I am no longer king," said Cronus in disinterest. "I am now a man who can only visit Low-Gear once his son lets his guard down."

"It is a shame we must meet in a place like this. And you have to leave soon, don't you? What do you need today? Surely you aren't just here to see Rhea-san."

"Rhea came here after properly removing her concept and sending it to the Tartaros. No will remains in her corpse, so there is no meaning in seeing her. Dispose of her as you would a human of this world." Cronus adjusted his cloak's collar. "I have two things to say. First , 3rd-Gear has formed an alliance with 9th-Gear and they have decided to bring the fight here to your world."

His words caused Hiromasa and Ryuutetsu to freeze in place.

Ryuutetsu looked at Cronus with his one eye, but the old man said nothing.

Instead, Hiromasa pushed his glasses up his nose and asked a question.

"Can we win with these inventions of ours?"

"No. You seem to have mechanical dragons and concept weapons, but it will be a tie if they are on the same level as theirs and a loss if they are on a lower level. …Also, they will be arriving when this world reaches spring. Decentralize what is important and have your women and children evacuate. Leave behind only those who are willing to die or wish to gather wreckage from the battlefield."

"I see," said Hiromasa with a nod.

"Hey," said Ryuutetsu.

He took a slow breath and faced Cronus. No expression remained on his face and he weakly asked a question as if letting the words fall from his mouth.

"Will Zeus and Apollo be coming?"

"You cannot defeat them."

"I asked you if they'll be coming."

"Zeus will. But Apollo will remain in the temple. He annoyed Zeus because he could not bring himself to kill Rhea."

"Is that so?" Ryuutetsu showed his teeth in the corner of his mouth. "It's too bad Apollo won't be coming, but we can still open the gate, right? Not the one that sends a single person and closes like you use. The one that a god of war can travel back and forth through."

"Why do you wish to go that far?"

Cronus did not bother asking what he intended to do.

But it was not Ryuutetsu who responded.

It was Hiromasa. He grabbed Ryuutetsu's unmoving right shoulder.

"Hiba, you should give it up. You need to look at the people you have by your side."

"I know," said Ryuutetsu. "But you can't back down on some things. Hiromasa, you have a kid, don't you? That healthy but stupid-looking one. Why'd you give him his name?"

"Because I want him to be #1 in everything, be it health or stupidity."[2]

"Hah. Those of us from Low-Gear sure do like to get some actual benefit from things. I'm probably the same. If I have a kid, I think I'll give him a name that will help him make something of himself. But…" He swept off Hiromasa's hand with his left hand and smiled. "Rhea named her daughter Mikage. When Mikage was born, that was how she saw the early morning scenery outside the open-air dojo near my house. It was nothing more than the sun starting to rise, but she thought it warranted the name 'beautiful shadow'. …But she said 3rd-Gear didn't even have that. She said her daughter was a child of Low-Gear and she gave her that name to remind her daughter of that."

So…

"Mikage is a part of our world. I will take her back no matter what."

"I wouldn't be so sure."

The instant after Cronus's voice reverberated through the warehouse, Ryuutetsu grabbed Cronus's collar with his left hand.

"I don't care what you say! If the enemy wants to come , let them come. And now it's our turn to go to them. That's all there-…"

"That is not all there is to it. Not when it comes to Mikage."

"What else is there!?"

"Mikage could not have children."

The words seemed to spill from Cronus's mouth.

Ryuutetsu and Hiromasa were dumbfounded. Ryuutetsu's eye opened wide, strength left his hand, and he let go of Cronus's collar.

"Zeus had me examine her. When I viewed the future of her growth on the genetic level, I could tell she would grow to be a human who cannot have children."

It took several seconds for his statement to sink into the air and for understanding to sink into the two men.

Ryuutetsu was the first to react.

"Hah," he laughed while his shoulders shook.

His shoulders shook silently for a while, but his voice quickly joined them and then he doubled over.

"Ha ha! I-is that bastard Zeus an idiot? He caused such a huge commotion entering our world and he even killed a woman, but the daughter he got can't even have children? 3rd-Gear will be destroyed! You may have Apollo, but he doesn't have a partner!"

"That is why I created a partner for him. A partner created using Mikage."

"Wha-…?"

Ryuutetsu suddenly collapsed to the side.

After a sound of impact, he fell to his knees, revealing Hiromasa behind him. Hiromasa rested a metal rod on his shoulder and smiled toward Cronus.

"Sorry about that. It seems monkeys these days have high blood pressure. I will speak on his behalf, so what exactly do you mean? Have you completed a method of altering an infertile mother?"

"No. I have recently been working with an automaton."

"Meaning?"

"Functionally, it is simply an automaton with the gravitational ability omitted. …However, it can evolve into a human."

The meaning of his words left Hiromasa speechless. Cronus gave a self-deprecating smile before continuing.

"Metal has life. And so metal should be able to evolve as life and become human. I have completed an automaton designed for that purpose. Just before coming here, I transplanted Mikage as the managing body for that automaton. And the surgery was a success. Mikage has cast aside her infertile body and now lives inside an automaton that might be able to have children eventually."

Hiromasa fell silent and Ryuutetsu slowly stood up while regulating his breathing.

While standing, he instantly grabbed the metal rod from Hiromasa's grasp.

"How much are you going to toy with us!?"

He swung the rod down at Cronus with all his strength.

He targeted the top of the old man's head. The rod could not miss.

"…"

But he stopped it a hair's breadth from Cronus's forehead.

And yet the old man did not even look toward the weapon that had almost struck him. He only looked at the weapon's wielder.

"Are you not going to hit me?"

"If I do, that bastard Zeus would notice. That would put Mikage's life at risk."

"Are you sure it is not that you *cannot* hit me? Because you do not wish to lower yourself to our level?"

Ryuutetsu let out a laugh and jabbed his elbow into Cronus.

The old man stumbled back two steps but did not fall. He also looked toward Ryuutetsu for a moment. The young man was wrinkling his brow and gathering strength in his shoulders.

"Interesting." The old man nodded with an impressed look. "Humans are quite interesting. Ha ha. Especially those of this Gear!"

He brought a hand to his wrinkled cheek and touched his lips as he laughed.

"Is this a time when one should laugh? I apologize, but it's been so long that I've completely forgotten. Ha ha. But you are so very amusing. It has been a while since I have seen anyone this amusing."

"You're a human too, you know? You saw my attack, but you didn't avoid it. Do you think you should die? How naïve."

Ryuutetsu looked away from Cronus and to his own god of war.

"Just wait, old man. I swear to you I'll make my way there. If I'm gonna kill you, it'll be then."

"I doubt you can make it there alive."

"Just shut up and leave," said Ryuutetsu. "Hiromasa, I know you're busy having fun with 2nd-Gear, but help me modify my Susahito. Once I bring back Mikage, I'll pay you back for your excellent work."

"How very selfish. I promise you I will ask you to pay me back in the worst possible way. I can no longer worry about appearances while dealing with Yamata."

Hiromasa smiled bitterly and turned to Cronus.

"Still, I will make sure this monkey finds his way to 3rd-Gear, Former King Cronus." He took a breath. " Mikage is indeed a child of Low-Gear. It was after her birth that Rhea-san began to cooperate with us. She gave us information on the Concept War and she had the mechanical dragon Xolotl 3 open a path to 5th-Gear. … We cannot ignore her or her family."

"Such a foolish Gear. How very appropriate for the lowest level."

"Isn't that why you were laughing?"

Cronus nodded and began walking. He walked outside where it was still dark.

"I will send a messenger later. There is only so far you can modify that god of war."

"We won't thank you."

"Fine by me," said the old man as he passed through the warehouse entrance.

He vanished into the dark and foggy early morning.

"It is too bad that I must leave without seeing the world Rhea saw. I will also tell you one other thing I meddled with." He paused a moment. "I set the path of Mikage's evolution to become as much like a Low-Gear human as possible. Once her evolution begins, she will not have a long life like us and she will not possess a concept to control nature. She will be a powerless mother . But to defend her, she will be given the spare for Typhon which is currently under construction."

"You thought of her as a part of this Gear from the beginning…"

"This is just for fun. And as proof, I will leave you with a certain game. Once this spare god of war is complete, half of 3rd-Gear's Concept Core will go to Typhon, half will go to Typhon's weapon named Keravnos, and then Zeus and I will enter the Tartaros."

"What!? Is that bastard planning to quit while he's ahead!?"

"He is creating a copy of his will. That copy will be placed inside the gray god of war as an advisor for 3rd-Gear. And instead of within Typhon, Keravnos will be sealed within the spare being given to Mikage."

"What?"

"If you wish to destroy 3rd-Gear, come take Mikage. But she is a baby. How will you defeat the god of war army led by Apollo, quiet a crying baby, and take her with you? That is the game. This is my final bit of fun after toying with so many lives."

Cronus's words dissolved into the warehouse.

And then the past slowly dissolved into darkness, into nothingness.

As he saw the past come to an end, Sayama muttered to himself.

“So Mikage-kun is at the center of it all.”

There was a wooden staircase.

The narrow staircase was illuminated by the red lights on the ceiling. The sides were left open to make it look bigger, so the single spiral of the stairs had only a thick railing on either side.

The lights illuminated a single figure halfway up the wooden stairs.

It was a girl with blonde hair.

She wore a long-sleeved black turtleneck and a white dress as she sat sideways on the stairs. She was writing in a journal placed on a step higher than her elbow.

She created a string of writing on the white page of the journal.

“What Happened Today – Hiba Mikage”

She was pressing down a bit too hard as she wrote, but the handwriting was neat.

She looked at the white gloves covering her hands, she looked at the words, and she nodded. She flipped through the past pages and compared her name.

Today's handwriting closely resembled the handwriting on the previous day and the day before that.

She quickly flipped through the pages, moving further and further into the past of the thick journal. Photographs were inserted at points and she had made drawings at some points.

The drawings were detailed. The pencil sketches looked a lot like a black-and-white photograph.

Her expression clouded over a bit as she looked at them. She looked at her fingers, but she continued flipping the pages to the past.

The earliest ones were from January.

The first entry was about the Kagami Biraki. She compared the handwriting there to that of the current entry.

She could tell the past entry used a lot fewer kanji than the current one. That was because she studied a lot since then, but she had not had to worry about difficult kanji back then. Also…

"Ihs oh eet."

It's so neat.

A few of the characters in the past entry were much more detailed than now. They looked like the product of a printer.

"…"

She looked to her right hand and the glove covering it.

She slowly placed her left hand on the glove and removed it.

The removal of the white cloth revealed a hand too white to be flesh-colored. The joints and palm were still made of a material resembling black plastic.

"Ih oohs."

It moves.

The hand made precise movements in accordance with her will.

She lowered the ends of her eyebrows and her shoulders drooped.

But she flipped back through the journal with one hand.

She returned to the current page and even more strength left her lowered shoulders. She sighed and tapped the journal several times with the tip of the mechanical pencil she held.

"I'll ooh I ehs."

I'll do my best.

She nodded and strength returned to her shoulders. She adjusted her grip on the pencil and began recording the events of the day.

…What happened today?

She had a lot to write. She wrote instead of speaking, instead of making noise.

Rather than having Hiba take the time to read her lips every day, she felt it was less of a bother to write a journal entry and have him read it.

Once that had become customary, Hiba had started reading the journal entry aloud and she would move her mouth to emulate his. That was their latest speech training.

…When I woke up, Ryuuji-kun was there.

For some reason, Hiba always grew flustered when she wrote that in the journal entry. He had grown extremely flustered when she had written about how he would wash her body in the bath. She still could not move her arms and hands properly and her body was hard. She needed someone to do that for her and she could relax if it was Hiba, so she felt it was only natural.

She wondered what the problem was. His mother said it was because her body and mind still needed to grow as

a woman. But in that case, she did not understand why her inexperienced and incomplete self would make Hiba grow flustered.

She wrote about the day, about waking up, about the morning, about midday, about the afternoon, about the evening, about the night, about what was to come, and about what she could never allow herself to forget.

"Ow ih I eel?"

How did I feel?

How did she feel about what?

She was not sure.

She often did not know what she felt about things. She had thought about a lot of things, started feeling sleepy, wrapped herself in the curtain, and fell asleep while waiting for the sun to rise. When she had woken again, it had been bright. How was that supposed to make her feel? That was when Hiba had arrived and woken her.

"I was happy," she wrote.

She then added that she was happy that she had been able write that honestly.

Her journal entry jumped around in time a lot and contained a lot of comments.

But she had a lot to write. She filled the page as if getting the words out of her system.

During the evening, Hiba had called her. At a place called school he had spoken with people known as upperclassmen. He had told them about one of 3rd-Gear' s two impurities.

Of those upperclassmen, there were two named Sayama and Shinjou who Hiba had yet to speak with properly and Hiba speculated that they were an active hard gay couple. Mikage did not understand what that meant, but it was not often that Hiba's voice trembled in fear like that. She could only assume those two were frightening.

He had said he would meet with them the following morning and speak some more.

He had hesitantly asked if she would meet them too.

From his tone, Mikage could tell he was unsure what to do.

And to be honest, Mikage was having difficulty deciding how to handle the battle with 3rd-Gear.

Her body would evolve into a human body.

But that evolution had stopped five years ago.

It had stopped the first time she had called out the black god of war for their first battle with 3rd-Gear.

They had tried various methods of starting it again.

…But we only have half the Concept Core.

That was Hiba's theory. They had half of 3rd-Gear's Concept Core in Keravnos, but 3rd-Gear's strongest god of war had the other half. Hiba theorized that her remaining evolution could not be completed without obtaining that other half.

On the other hand, their opponent wanted her body. They wanted her as a 3rd-Gear human and as the final possibility for a mother.

But Mikage did not entirely understand what the word ‘mother’ meant.

She thought it was someone who could have children, cook food, and look after others, but she doubted she could ever act as considerately as Hiba’s mother.

She had no voice, she could not walk properly, and she had little knowledge of the world.

“Uh ah I uhoh oo oo?”

What am I supposed to do?

She had a feeling she knew what would happen.

…I can’t do it.

She had never told anyone about that thought. Not even Hiba.

She just wanted to be near Hiba. She did not care about her evolution or becoming a mother. As long as she could be by his side and see all sorts of things with him, that was enough.

But he was fighting for her evolution and to protect her.

She did not know why. However, she did not want him to be hurt, so she had all the damage done to the god of war sent back to herself.

The damage to its wings from the other day remained as a wound on the flesh she had received via her evolution. However, that wound would soon return to normal thanks to her natural healing.

That was the most she could do to help him.

"…"

She wondered whether she should write that thought or not.

It would worry Hiba. Should she expose all of her imperfections and inexperience and leave the decision to him?

She then heard a noise.

"?"

The door had opened downstairs. The footsteps in the entranceway were those of the new shoes Hiba had bought for school in April.

…I need to go.

She placed a hand on the stairway wall. She grabbed the railing, pulled her body up, twisted her waist, bent her back, and brought her shoulders up higher than the railing.

She had to go. If he saw her sitting there, he would immediately pick her up and carry her. She appreciated the thought, but she did not like that she had no choice but to go along with it.

…Ahh.

She wondered if it was wrong of her to be so glad when he did things for her.

She stood up.

She stood on her trembling legs and her weak knees. As she grasped the railing, her field of vision rose quite high.

When she had first done this, the height had surprised her. As she recalled that, she descended the stairs. She moved ever so slowly toward where he was removing his shoes down below.

She approached him just like always.

Chapter 8: Nighttime Visitor

Chapter 8

“Nighttime Visitor”

That which asks yet provides no answer
Acts for that very reason
The same goes for that which receives no answer yet asks

That which asks yet provides no answer

Acts for that very reason

The same goes for that which receives no answer yet asks

A large white space measured one hundred meters in each direction. That dining hall had a single table almost as long as the room and it shined brightly under the lights on the ceiling.

Those lights also illuminated a woman in white clothing.

The black-haired woman was Miyako. She sat in a chair with her legs crossed and her arms folded. Her legs were shaking up and down which produced a comment from Moira 3rd who sat on the ground at her feet.

"Are you nervous, princess?"

"These are nicotine withdrawal symptoms. Honestly, don't you at least have some toothpicks?"

"Toothpicks?"

Moira 3rd tilted her head at first but then stood up with a sudden idea.

She ran toward the kitchen and the two automatons standing at its entrance moved out of her way. As Miyako watched, she scratched her head in confusion.

The table in front of her contained the standard fork, spoon, and knife, but it also contained chopsticks and a Chinese spoon for some reason.

A close look showed the Chinese spoon was meant for children and it was printed with pictures of characters from the recently popular children's anime titled "Manga 's First Armored Infantryman". Namely, it had the protagonist Second Lieutenant Hayato and the mascot armor Bottom-tan.

Everything's been mecha recently, thought Miyako. *And they probably set this table based on something they saw in a book.*

She felt they were trying to be considerate, but she felt something else even more.

…Is the food still not ready?

Just as she was thinking it was taking far too long, Moira 3rd ran out of the kitchen. She held up a small container.

"Princess! Here are the toothpicks you wanted!"

"That's garlic powder, you idiot! I can't pretend to smoke that!"

She chopped the girl on her blonde head.

"Nwah! I-I was only a little bit off! Right!?"

"A little bit!? Garlic and toothpick rhyme, but that's it!"

She was not entirely sure why it mattered if they rhymed, but she swiped the garlic powder and placed it on the table.

"I don't need to take it back?" asked Moira 3rd with a tilt of the head.

"If you serve anything too bad, I can sprinkle this on to mask the flavor."

"Wow! Low-Gear culture is amazing!"

"Of course it is!"

But the food was very late. Miyako rested her head on her hand and asked a sudden question.

"By the way, Moira 3rd, am I ever going to see 2nd?"

"Hmm. Our middle sister doesn't like being around people. She didn't used to be that way, though."

"What?"

Miyako tilted her head and Moira 3rd groaned and tilted her head as well.

There seemed to be a difficult problem.

…I see. I shouldn't have asked that.

She reached out and rubbed Moira 3rd's head without even looking toward her.

"Wa ha ha. Lord Cronus would do the same thing."

"Is that so? …Oh, one other thing. Will your master be eating with us?"

The Moirai's explanation had ended with Rhea's child returning to 3rd-Gear and Zeus and Cronus entering the Tartaros.

Rhea had not returned, but Miyako assumed that was due to something they were hesitant to speak of.

She still did not know Rhea's child's name. Zeus had not made it public because it was an impure name, but Miyako did not even know if the child was alive or dead.

…This is the kind of suspicion horrible adults tend to have.

But depending how the final battle played out, it was entirely possible that the man named Apollo and Rhea's child had survived. The figure with long blond hair she had seen may have been one of the two.

"Well?" she asked again.

"He probably will." Moira 3rd nodded. "Typhon is quiet today too."

"Typhon? You mean that white robot that grabbed me and carried me away last night?"

"Eh? Oh, yes. We hate it, though."

"Does your master pilot it?"

"No, no. Lord Apollo is too pathetic for that."

Miyako's eyebrows rose when she heard the name.

"Is Apollo here?"

"Eh?" Moira 3rd tilted her head and spoke as if explaining the obvious. "Of course he is. He's alive. It's just that he's so pathetic that he can't voluntarily fight right now. I guess you could say someone else is piloting Typhon."

That's right, mentally agreed Miyako.

She recalled what Moira 1st had said during the kamishibai.

…He had a younger sister who was turned into a god of war after refusing to be sent to the Tartaros.

The pale blue god of war in the kamishibai was likely Apollo's.

"Is the other pilot Rhea's child? Or is there someone else?"

"Well…" Moira 3rd sounded troubled. "That isn't it either. Lady Rhea's child isn't here. Our big sister might not have explained it, but a lot happened and so the one piloting Typhon is-…"

"The food is ready!"

When Moira 1st's dignified voice filled the room, Moira 3rd's shoulders jumped and she seemed to intentionally not finish her sentence.

…They must have their reasons.

As a guest, Miyako did not want to stick her nose in their business. She smiled bitterly at Moira 3rd who was hiding behind her and she turned toward Moira 1st who quickly pushed in a stretcher.

The stretcher contained a large round metal lid. It had a radius of almost a meter and Moira 1st smiled as she brought it over.

"I apologize for the delay. We made this especially for you, so we went all out and used some ingredients Master Aigaion brought in a hurry."

"What is it?"

"Can you guess?"

Miyako thought about it. It would be something from their culture, so she would never be able to guess. However, there would likely be some similarities, so she guessed the simplest, largest, and most expensive dish she could think of.

"A 250g steak."

"Hm, not quite."

"A fried food combination platter."

"No, not that either."

"The tempura B meal."

"Princess, all of your guesses are very fatty. And what does 'B meal' mean?"

She wanted to say it was from her school cafeteria, but she resisted. She wondered what would require such a large lid. A whole roast pig seemed too much.

"Hm… I'm not sure."

Moira 1st's smile changed to one of obvious joy and she lifted the metal lid. As a large amount of steam escaped, the dish became visible.

"Tah dah! It's a crab hot pot!"

"H-how the hell was I supposed to guess that!? Not to mention that it's summer."

"Do you not like crab? Master Aigaion's book said it is a famous Japanese dish."

"I like crab, but… what happened to Greek mythology ? And…"

She started complaining and Moira 1st held out a ladle with holes.

Miyako stood up and took the red handle without thinking. The ladle bowed to her and then straightened its back.

…What a well-mannered ladle.

Suddenly, all the lights but the one above her shut off. A drum roll started somewhere.

"Okay, the princess will now carry out the cutting of the hot pot!"

"S-stop that! I don't know whose wedding you spied on, but you only do that with wedding cakes! And you can't cut a hot pot in the first place!"

The lights returned to normal, revealing a disappointed Moira 1st and an automaton holding a drum.

Miyako gave an exasperated sigh.

But then a new figure entered the dining hall. It was a blond man wearing white.

It was Apollo.

He walked through the dining hall while smiling and raising a hand toward the automatons.

His blond hair fluttered around his kindly face.

When she recalled the person she had seen from behind earlier, she knew this was him.

…He looks a lot like the woman in the hallway picture frame .

That woman was likely his sister Artemis.

That sounds like a sad story, she thought. *I should stop asking questions.*

To change her train of thought, she glanced toward him and whispered in Moira 1st's ear.

"Will he be able to understand me?"

"If you can understand us, you will be fine. That means the common language concept is functioning."

I didn't exactly understand all of that, she muttered in her heart.

Moira 1st may have picked up on how she was feeling because she relaxed her smile and nodded.

"Do not worry. Lord Apollo has been reading and studying the books Master Aigaion brings back. He at least knows the Japanese words that are known around the world: konnichiwa, kore ikura, harakiri, etc."

"Now you're disgracing our country!?"

Moira 1st ignored her with a smile.

"At any rate, he is a royal, so he will give the greatest and most polite greeting of your world."

Miyako froze momentarily when she heard the word " royal".

But a click of the tongue later, she was back to normal.

She took three breaths. By the time the scent of crab had travelled from her nose to her mouth, Apollo had arrived in front of her.

He was tall. She had always ended up in the back of the class when lined up by height, but he was two levels taller than her. She felt his long blond hair was too old fashioned, but she also felt his slender face was nice.

…Huh?

A sudden question reached her.

…Why do I feel nostalgic?

She tilted her head with the ladle in her right hand.

"Ah."

She noticed the eyes of the young man whose smile could be described as weak or even sickly.

His eyes were the same yellow as the eyes of the white god of war she had seen the night before.

She felt a warm tremble travel up her spine.

"!"

She was not sure what to call that trembling that came with a realization.

But she recalled something as her memories of the previous night grew more distinct.

When she had seen the god of war's eyes, she had felt an indescribable feeling.

What had that been?

And now Apollo's eyes had the same color.

…Will he give me the same feeling?

But her question was not answered.

While she remained motionless, he closed his eyes and gave a smile with a hint of bitterness.

And he spread his arms.

He bowed elegantly in preparation for his greeting.

"Will you marry me!?"

She reflexively slammed the ladle onto his lowered head.

A dignified metallic noise sounded loudly.

3rd-Gear's headquarters were wrapped in darkness.

The white-walled building glowed palely in the moonlight and a small figure stood at the bottom of one wall.

That figure was the automaton named Gyes.

The red of her suit sank into darkness under the night sky.

"…"

She suddenly looked up toward a light.

Above the giant hangar door behind her, light came from the top level of the four-story residential area.

"How unusual," she muttered. "That would be the dining hall."

The Moirai were likely working there for the princess who had been brought in the night before.

She thought she heard a strange metallic noise, but she suspected her hearing devices were malfunctioning because it made no sense for that to come from the dining hall.

Earlier, the princess had been introduced to her, Aigaion, and Cottus in the courtyard.

The Moirai seemed to like this princess. 2nd likely wanted to keep her distance because she had not been at the introduction, but the other maids seemed to have a favorable opinion of her. They liked the commotion surrounding her escape and they liked her attitude.

"She shows no restraint around us."

She smiled bitterly.

That is a good thing, she determined. *If only good things like that could continue.*

"As always, she will lose her memories and be returned in about three days, but this was a first. If the situation does not change, we may have to dispose of her while the Moirai are not watching."

The Moirai would criticize the decision, but letting someone leave with their memories intact was too dangerous. That danger took precedence over criticism from the Moirai. After all, the Hecatoncheires were meant to protect that place.

She then heard a noise. She detected movement in a thicket on the slope about ten degrees left of straight ahead. Her eyes could see in the dark, so she easily detected the person's silhouette and spoke their name.

"Hajji of the Army?"

"Yes. That's right. That's exactly right, Gyes. It's been much too long."

The thicket parted and revealed a tall elderly man with brown skin and a white cloth wrapped around his head. He was slender, but his shoulders were plenty broad. A hemp jacket was draped over his right shoulder and his hemp trousers were held up by suspenders.

"I have a lot of information for you today. You want it, don't you? Surely you do."

"Of course." Gyes folded her arms and looked at the old man's left eye which was covered by a black eyepatch. "Say what you have to say and get lost, former 9th-Gear general. We had wondered what you had been up to ever since 9th-Gear's destruction, but we did not expect you to wander up five years ago with an organization named the Army."

"My motives are complex. I suppose that is a subtlety of being human. You have stayed in this area all this time , so you don't know what happened in this country ten years ago or how things have changed since the destruction of the ten former Gears, do you? Hm?"

"I am not interested in that. It was a single hope that allowed us to remain active for the fifty years after 3rd-Gear's destruction. The hope of 3rd-Gear's humans surviving."

Gyes's words brought Hajji to a stop. He was three meters from her and he stood as if positioning himself directly below the moonlight.

But his one eye did not look toward Gyes; it looked toward the large hangar door behind her.

"Survival, hm?" He brought a hand to his mouth and held a smile in his eyes. "And that hope was answered when I found this place five years ago, was it not? It was thanks to those materials you hadn't been able to obtain and the philosopher's stones I had gathered."

"Do not hope for anything more in return. Five years ago, we made the promise to repay you for awakening our master and we are not the kind of machine that will

break a promise." Gyes took a breath and glared at Hajji. "If we ever no longer need 3rd-Gear's Concept Core, we will give you the wreckage of Typhon which uses it as its reactor. Not a surprising request for the Army as you barely have any gods of war."

"Do you think that will be happening anytime soon? With the defeat of Typhon, for example."

Gyes suddenly raised a hand.

That right hand was wrapped in light. A ring was embedded at the base of each finger.

She pointed the index finger toward Hajji.

"…!"

And he turned back and to the right.

A silver arc cut through the darkness as if following his movement.

The sound of slicing air stopped right in front of his face.

The sound came from a long sword. It was at least a meter long and it floated in midair.

Hajji stared at the tip of the blade.

“How frightening.”

And his expression changed because the sword had cut the string to his eyepatch.

He remained silent as the black eyepatch fell from his face. His expression changed from surprise to a mix between anger and a smile.

“!”

And he let out a quick, sharp shout.

It all happened before Gyes’s eyes in an instant.

Hajji’s left hand grabbed the falling eyepatch and his right shot up.

That was enough to smash her sword. But that was not all. Starting from the location of the sword and moving toward her, everything – including the air – was loudly destroyed.

"Wha-…!?"

Before she could even finish the word, she chose defense.

She spread both hands and six swords flew from her suit's long sleeves. The blades were made of soft metal and they bent along with the curved surface of her suit, but she used her gravitational control to condense them into a fixed shape. They all transformed into long, hard swords.

"Seyah!!"

She swung down her arms and the six blades swung down toward the destruction of the air travelling down the center.

A metallic noise rang out.

The six blades were instantly smashed into dust, but she did not care. She was facing the man who had managed the attack power of an entire Gear. The attack was not meant to defeat him; it was meant to buy enough time for her to evade.

"What power is this!?"

She tried to determine the power's identity.

…Disintegration? No, and it isn't a concept of destruction either. To eliminate this much…

That was as far as her thoughts got. She realized she would be completely destroyed if she did not evade.

And so she used gravity on her back to forcibly spin herself back and to the right.

Her red heels shot dirt into the air as she fell back. After moving four meters, her back was almost to the white wall, but the warning bells in her head were still ringing.

She jumped to the side.

An instant later, it arrived at the spot she had been in.

The destructive attack sounded like multiple attacks.

The invisible power smashed the air and gouged out a large hole in the wall. In quick succession, it created eighteen sounds and scars as if from driving a stake into the wall. The fragments of the wall turned to dust and nothing remained.

“What was that?”

Gyes remained motionless to the left. The hole in the wall looked like fang marks from a giant beast. It looked like someone had jammed a large, twisted, and dull spear into it.

“Sorry.”

Gyes turned toward the voice.

Hajji stood in the same position as before, but his left eye was now covered by a shifted portion of the white cloth hiding his hair. He brought a hand to his mouth.

"I came here for business reasons, but I came so very close to losing you. At least until you lose your battle, we are…how should I put it? Business partners, I suppose. Isn't that right?"

Gyes did not answer and made sure she could still pull three more swords from her suit.

"What was that power? Was it 9th-Gear's Concept Core?"

"Is that question related to our business?" Despite the question, he had a smile in his eyes. "Well, I can tell you that much for free. This is purely out of kindness, okay? That is not a Concept Core. It is my concept weapon and its true form is not here."

He removed his hand from his mouth and lightly tapped the eye hidden by the white cloth.

"To state it another way, it is a grudge."

He smiled bitterly and then hid that smile with his hand once more. But the smile strengthened and he laughed quietly. He bent forward and laughed even more.

"Sorry about that. I really am sorry. Gyes, I have to thank you and not just for being a business partner. That reminded me what has happened since 9th-Gear's defeat and why I created the Army. You said you do not understand my motives, didn't you? Well, there is nothing simpler than this." He straightened up but left the hand at his mouth. "I will destroy the villains. Those villains pretend to merely be playing the villain's role so they can avoid facing their own evil, but I will destroy them as a failed villain who never succeeded in his past attempts to destroy the other Gears."

"What a crazy thing to say. And why will you do this? For a personal grudge?"

"No," declared Hajji. "Didn't I tell you before? I will hand this Gear over to those who it truly belongs to."

"What do you mean by that?"

Hajji shook his head without answering.

"If you want to know that, Gyes, you must join the Army."

"Ha. So it comes back to that? That is impossible and meaningless. All we wish for is a peaceful life. As long as Lord Apollo who we serve is fine, nothing else matters."

"Oh?" said Hajji. "If you wish for peace, why do you occasionally head out to battle?"

"Well…"

…So they noticed.

Hajji seemed to read her mind.

"Typhon is powered by half of your Concept Core, but only half. It was designed that way, but you hope that adding in the other half would allow Apollo to-…"

Gyes sensed danger in his words. They were inside a concept space, so his words could not escape outside.

…But he is using his ability to leak this information as a threat!

She still had three swords left in her suit. Her decision-making ability told her she had a 100% chance of losing against him, but she could sacrifice herself if she cut off her self-preservation calculations.

"Wait!"

Hajji shouted and held forward his right hand. Gyes stopped with her hands reaching for the back of her waist.

As she glared at him, he held forward his left hand as well and lightly waved them.

"Was that a secret? Hm, sorry. I couldn't help but mention it."

"Next time, I will take off your head."

She returned her hands forward and put her self-preservation calculations back in place.

"And you may call it battle, but lately we have been sending out remote-controlled decoys to search for that black god of war. We Hecatoncheires have been doing that without Lord Apollo's permission. And Typhon acts

whether we want it to or not. It seeks the half of the Concept Core it lacks."

"I see." Hajji nodded and took a breath. "Then let us get down to business."

"That lead in was much too long. How can you run an organization like that?"

"I'm good at grabbing people's attention. It's the first thirty seconds that really matter. A leader must be a skilled talker. Am I wrong? Hm? And in the ten years since the Army was established, I have gathered the people we need. We will capture UCAT before long." He smiled bitterly. "Now for why I am here. Typhon flew east yesterday, didn't it? It could no longer resist not having the rest of the Concept Core, so it flew away from you. And then it was intercepted by-…"

"We know. When Typhon returned, it had been hit by Keravnos. It ran into that black god of war."

"Yes, and that god of war has met with UCAT."

"What?"

Hajji's eyes narrowed.

"This information is new to you, isn't it? The organization that contained the one piloting the god of war which destroyed 3rd-Gear has contacted the pilot of the god of war that is currently fighting 3rd-Gear. Also, lights have started appearing in UCAT's training facility at the Seto Inland Sea. They are preparing for someone to arrive there."

Gyes bit her lower lip.

…I hope Typhon didn't leave any traces of its movement last night.

Either way, the black god of war would often attack them. They had been the first to attack, but the other side also seemed to have a reason to fight.

…Especially that black god of war.

With that thought, she nodded.

"You have my thanks."

But by the time she looked up, Hajji was nowhere to be seen. Unlike with his arrival, he had not even made footsteps.

And then a male voice came from beyond a nearby thicket.

“He got away. And after I resisted watching that night game to keep an eye out.”

The thicket parted and revealed a large man. He wore a mountain vest and work pants and he had a hand towel hanging from his waist that contained a greengrocer’s logo. He clicked his tongue and looked around.

“I wonder if Hanshin won.”

“This world really has changed you. More importantly , what do you think of what Hajji said?”

“When he was dealing with you, he did not even take a step toward me. If he had, I was planning to crush his limbs with god of war level gravitational strength.”

“Don’t be so mad, Aigaion. He may not look it, but he is the general of 9th-Gear. That is a pure combat Gear where everything is known as a holy war and its people have the divine protection of the god of heroes. They

destroyed our land by filling their people with the power of god and using them as bombs. This is the man who calmly commanded them."

Gyes used gravity to draw the three swords at her waist and had them float before her eyes.

"If possible, I wanted to use these to…"

She trailed off. As Aigaion asked her what the matter was, she held the three swords up on her fingertips.

Only the grips of the swords remained. The blades had been made of soft metal, but they had still been smashed to dust.

"Did he guide that previous attack into them?"

That was a warning, she thought. *If he had been serious, he could have destroyed me at any time.*

"I see," she muttered. "The Army is not our ally. I already knew that, but I had grown careless. We need to cut our own path forward."

"What should we do?"

"Once they are finished eating up above, we will ask the Moirai to handle Cottus's and my shifts. When I saw Typhon yesterday, it had fragments of the black god of war on its fist. That god of war was damaged. If it has contacted UCAT, we need to attack as soon as possible," she declared. "Early tomorrow morning, we will attack that black god of war and secure it if possible. This is for the sake of 3rd-Gear's human race."

Chapter 9: That Which a God Desires

Chapter 9

“That Which a God Desires”

You think you said too much
But what you are thinking is the same
It is simply a difference in the sky you live below

You think you said too much

But what you are thinking is the same

It is simply a difference in the sky you live below

A river flowed through the night.

The Aki River cut east to west across the southern end of Akigawa which was west of Tokyo. The city was named after the river and the river had quite a few fields and empty lots on its northern side and several residential areas along the mountain range to its south.

In the center of one residential area was a red-roofed building at the base of a mountain next to a Shinto shrine .

The nameplate said Kazami in black characters.

The kitchen window let light into the dark night.

The sounds and conversation coming from within were those of dinner.

The ten square meter kitchen had a wooden table in the center and the three members of the Kazami family sat around it.

Kazami's parents were eating, but Kazami herself was not. She had placed a large rucksack on the table's guest chair and was using it to pack.

Her father sprinkled some furikake on his rice and spoke.

"If you're leaving the morning after tomorrow, can't you visit here tomorrow? You're making your father sad."

"We're meeting at the school, so I want to be at my dorm tomorrow just in case. And you have a job tomorrow, don't you?"

"Yes, I have a meeting to get a new game project off the ground. It's called Father Princess 2. The first one had twelve papas. Eleven of them were dandies and experts at something and the last one was a Hanshin fan, always hilariously drunk, and a pachinko addict, but that just made it all the more popular."

"I see your projects are as weird as ever. It must be tough."

"Your training camp is going to be tough too, right? Children and adults are the same in the end."

Being called a child made Kazami smile.

…I only get treated like that at home.

"Well, I'll do my best. And sorry I can't come back here tomorrow."

She wondered if this was a case of a child not understanding how much her parents worried. She then wondered if wondering that meant she did actually understand, but she also felt that was just an excuse.

Whatever the case, she had a reason to leave early the next morning.

She was going to visit Hiba's home with Sayama and the others.

In the Kinugasa Library, Hiba had asked them if they were prepared to face the first impurity and they had found their answer.

…We have no choice but to do something about it.

And she had said she wanted to hear Sayama and Shinjou's opinions.

But they had their training camp the day after the next, so they had decided to meet the next morning. She had contacted Sayama as he returned from Kanda and he had agreed.

I have to get up early tomorrow, she thought as she packed her bag. She left an open space in the bag, but there was a simple reason for that.

"What kind of souvenir do you want?" she asked.

Her mother thought with a finger on her chin.

"Hmm. As long as you come back safely, that's good enough for me. And I've already gotten most kinds of souvenirs from your father's business trips. I certainly don't need another giant humanoid horseshoe crab like

the one hanging from the ceiling on the second floor. I'll knock you to the ground if you give me one."

"U-um, mom? I won't buy anything that senseless."

"That's right, mama. And that wasn't a souvenir. It's the costume I wore in the Kansai-only tokusatsu show ' Übermensch Purge – Soukatsu'."

"The theme song for that was amazing. Lightning~ flashes~ from the~ electric chair~! Is that how it went? I know it's a bit late to look into the mystery of my parents , but why do we have it?"

"Well," said her father as he crossed his arms. "After filming, I sat next to a fountain and started feeling really dehydrated, so I collapsed right into the fountain. Everyone was watching and they laughed at the ' swimming horseshoe crab', but I almost died. I brought it home to dry it, but the show was cancelled and I never got to return it."

"Another cancelled show? What was it about?"

"An excellent question. To adapt to the impatient modern children, Soukatsu fired his Special Arrest Beam and started getting torture-induced confessions within

seven seconds of the show starting. The remaining 25 minutes were spent verifying the misdeeds of his opponent. He would shout 'find the evidence!' But reality is harsh, so it would sometimes turn out his purging had been in error."

"You can't do that in a kid's show!"

"Don't worry. He would give a cheerful apology at the end of those episodes. 'Hi, everyone! It's Soukatsu! It looks like I killed an innocent today! I truly regret what happened!' I think it didn't catch on with the kids because the setting was just too complex."

"I'm pretty sure it was more than just the kids who had problems with that show."

…I need to stop asking these questions. Let's see… I need toiletries and we'll be swimming at the beach, so I should pack twice as much underwear. That leaves…

"Chisato? Your father might be a bit crazy, but you have to listen to him. It's dangerous to let him talk to himself."

"U-um, mom? Can't you listen to him?"

"Chisato, I am speaking to you, not your mother. Even if what I'm talking about is completely pointless!"

"Kyaah! Your father is always so strict about the most pointless things!"

Kazami sighed as her parents laughed. She was reminded that she would never be a match for them.

But then her mother asked a new question.

"You said this student council training camp is on a desert island in the Seto Inland Sea, right? Will the people other than you be okay?"

"I'd appreciate it if you worried about me too."

"You'll be fine. Door-to-door preachers from a religion big on sacrificing stopped by the other day and I asked them to pray for my daughter instead of me."

"Please don't do that, mom!"

"Chisato, I have an important quote for you: one for all and…I forget the rest."

Kazami hung her head. She tried sticking her head in the opened rucksack in front of her, but no convenient concept space created an escape route there.

“Chisato? Why are you shutting yourself in there? I don’t remember teaching you to play like that.”

“You didn’t have to teach me. This was naturally created by the environment here.”

“I see.” Her mother nodded. “Anyway, will you be leaving the island?”

“No. Is there a reason to?”

“Your mother is a nice person, so she has some concerns about Kansai.”

“Stop that,” said her mother with a glance and a sigh toward her father. The ends of her eyebrows were lowered for once. “I’m sure you have heard about the great Kansai earthquake.”

“That was when you were just a little kid, Chisato. A year later, we put together a charity concert.”

"Papa, you may be trying to help me, but stay quiet. I can handle this." Her mother sighed again and turned to Kazami with a relaxed expression. "Back then, I was still refusing to sing because I was fixated on myself. …Silly, isn't it? There were people who wanted to hear me sing regardless of my fixations."

Kazami froze in place when she heard this sudden comment.

She realized her pose for packing was not good for listening, so she quickly straightened up.

She was unsure what to say, but she wanted to say something befitting her position as her mother's child.

"Do you regret it?"

I feel like I'm digging up her past, she thought, but her mother shook her head with a smile.

"I do to a certain extent, but I also feel I mustn't sing while lying to myself. Basically, the problem is being bound by my fixations. As long as they remain, both singing and not singing will lead to regret. …Sorry I'm so selfish, papa."

"But it does seem your mother will be taking part in an event at the end of the year, Chisato."

Kazami turned to her mother who shrugged.

"I wonder what will happen to the lies I am telling myself. Anyway, let's get back on topic. And hurry up with the packing, Chisato."

"Right."

Kazami raised her head and thought. After managing to break out of her previous mood, she wondered if there was a way to get some proper information out of her parents.

Asking about the Seto Inland Sea area was likely taboo . That would only lead to unpleasant memories.

"By the way…"

As she thought about the past and the Mediterranean area, she recalled the Divine States-World Interaction Theory.

"Have you ever been to Greece?"

Her parents exchanged a glance.

"Do you want to go there? I have a project coming up called 'The 36th Chamber of Olympus', so- gwah!"

"Sorry. My hand slipped and I dropped an alarm clock on you."

"Don't do that, Chisato. Only I'm allowed to beat up your father."

"Okay, okay. But from that, I take it you've been there. Are you familiar with the local mythology?"

"Mythology again? Are they getting into that in world history classes these days?"

"That's right," she said with a nod.

Her father crossed his arms and gave an impressed groan. Her mother tilted her head, but she did not ask anything.

"What about the mythology do you want to know?" asked her father.

Kazami's father's question brought her relief and her shoulders relaxed.

"Well, maybe about dragons and divine swords… Y-y' know, like when I asked about Japanese mythology before. Can you tell me about that kind of thing?"

"Hmm."

Her father crossed his arms even deeper and her mother glanced at the clock.

"Twenty seconds!"

"Ah, isn't that being a bit harsh!? My heart's racing like crazy!"

After he rejoiced for a bit, he finally spoke.

"In that case, I'll start with the topic of dragons. As you probably know, Greek mythology is quite popular with the constellations and such."

"Yeah."

"The thing is, that mythology doesn't have any dragons of the type we think of nowadays. They're

mostly multi-headed snakes or great serpents. Other than that, they're all humanoid gods with a snake texture to them. There's also Medusa with snake hair, but most of the monsters in Greek mythology are human based. Giants, for example. That area had a lot of war, so they may have viewed humans as the true monsters."

"Then does Greek mythology not have any obvious examples of dragons or divine swords?"

"They actually do. The dragon was an embodiment of that which humans could not stand up to. In other words , that which not even the giants could stand up to was treated as a great dragon in Greek mythology. And that was Typhon."

"What was it that not even the giants could stand up to?"

"Think about how Typhon is spelled."

"Ah," said Kazami.

She had finally realized that it was one letter off from " typhoon".

"The typhoons created from shapeless wind were thought to have a spiraling dragon in the center. That Typhon was Greek mythology's greatest monster and he was said to have a human torso, a dragon's tail, and countless dragon heads. After he defeated Zeus, he was tricked and sealed below a volcano. Zeus's divine spear of heavenly thunder was used to do that." He smiled bitterly. "But it was the three Moirai sisters who controlled fate that successfully tricked him. If you think about it, even with fate on their side and the power of a volcano and lightning, he could only be sealed."

"They couldn't defeat him?"

"No. In a way, that is the greatest problem of Greek mythology. The question here is simple: how can one defeat Typhon who not even Zeus, father of the gods, could defeat?"

Her father's tone was lighthearted, but Kazami could not speak.

In 3rd-Gear, Typhon was a god of war. Also, Hiba had clashed with it twice.

But he had been unable to defeat it.

The giant white god of war had been able to instantly switch between attack and defense.

…And it is different from the Art of Walking.

They had wondered if it might be 2nd-Gear's Art of Walking, so Izumo had used it against Hiba. Even in the cramped library and against someone he barely knew, Izumo had pulled it off.

But Hiba had said that was not it. With the Art of Walking, one still took time to move. And he said Typhon's technique could not be teleportation because it had already been attacking the instant after it disappeared.

It had some power that surpassed even the wind.

"How do you defeat something like that?" she muttered aloud.

"Yes." Her father looked up at the ceiling with his arms still crossed. "But there is a way."

"Eh?"

"Think about it. Zeus sealed Typhon and brought prosperity to the world. Why was that? Why did he face the world by turning his back on a monster he could not defeat?"

Kazami did not quite understand what he meant.

Was he saying there was a way to defeat the dragon that not even the most powerful god could defeat?

As she frowned and tilted her head, her father smiled and nodded.

"Think about it. Your training camp is on the Seto Inland Sea, right? Perhaps that will help you think about Greece which also borders an inland sea."

Kazami let out an admiring breath and placed a folded towel in the rucksack.

"My parents really are amazing."

Her parents cheered and high-fived each other.

Once more, she realized she would always be no match for them.

Below the moonlit night sky, Miyako and Moira 1st sat outside the emergency exit.

They were high up. Once Moira 1st had brought out what she claimed was sake, Miyako had insisted they drink it while viewing the moon. They had brought a few cooked ingredients from the crab hot pot for snacks and Miyako drank while Moira 1st sat to her right.

The moonlight was a pale blue.

A bit of light escaped the hangar door down below, but it was not enough to interfere with the moon viewing .

She had asked to be let in there earlier, but she had been gently refused.

“We would need to clean up first.”

The sake had been produced to console her realization that there was some secret there, so she drank.

The cup seemed to be made of aluminum and it grew a bit soft whenever she took a sip. It may have been embarrassed.

…What a strange world.

She looked around and saw Kurashiki in the distance. It was already past nine. Based on her memories from her school trip, that city closed early. Even the theme park to the north end of the city had shut off its lights.

She nodded.

"Will Mr. Rich Boy be fine after I floored him?"

"You mean Lord Apollo? Moira 2nd said he should be fine."

That name reminded Miyako of the maid who had entered the dining hall, grabbed Apollo's collar, and carried him out with the other maids. Miyako had seen her short blonde hair and blue eyes, but the maid had never looked her way.

…Does she not like me?

Moira 1st shook her head as if in answer and Miyako's eyebrows rose.

"You can't read my mind, can you?"

"No, but you are honest, so I can tell from your expressions."

"Don't be silly. I've always been rebellious."

Moira 1st only smiled in reply.

Miyako could do nothing but sigh and rest her head on her hands. She looked up in the sky and saw the moon.

"So when you get down to it, I can't leave this place?"

"Yes. I am very sorry," answered Moira 1st after a short pause. "And I must apologize again because we cannot allow you to leave until our problem is at least temporarily settled. This is all because your memories returned."

"Can't you give me new memories again?"

"Forcing it a second time would create interference and possibly fry your brain, so you must remain with us until our problem is settled."

To sum up what she had learned that day, 3rd-Gear had not surrendered to an organization named UCAT and they were also fighting that black god of war which was not part of UCAT.

…Both sides must want to settle this.

"That sounds rough."

"What does?"

"You all are betting your world and everything else on this. It's pretty amazing. I can't compare to that."

She sighed and looked up at the moon. The pale blue light of the moon was connected to her family name.

That color made her think about the white god of war's eye color. She thought about the feeling that the yellow light had given her and that the pale blue light had not.

…What was that?

Was it something only she could understand? She was not sure if that possibility made her happy or sad. She did not understand anything.

…After all, that white god of war suddenly grabbed me and carried me away after I ran across it.

When it had the pale blue eyes, its movements had grown much more vigorous.

She suddenly became intensely curious as to why.

"I asked Moira 3rd about that white god of war's name and she said it was Typhon."

"Yes, but why do you bring it up? It only took you hostage because it was afraid after receiving an attack for the first time. I will apologize in the pilot's place."

Miyako tilted her head and opened her mouth uncertainly.

"No, I was just wondering if I could speak with it. … Well, I suppose meeting with the pilot would work, but you won't let me, will you?"

"No. Typhon is filled with secrets. If we could erase your memories, I could receive permission, but that is not the case."

She ended her statement with a smile and Miyako held out her cup to receive more sake.

"I apologize for all the lack of freedom, but in exchange, you may freely use us while we are here."

"C'mon, don't get carried away. So if I told you to strip , you'd strip?"

"Are you interested in my joints?"

Moira 1st reached for her skirt, so Miyako frantically stopped her.

She's serious, she thought. *Although she might be more stupid than she is obedient.*

"When you say 'we', how many does that include?"

"There are three primary models with the Moira designation which are numbered 1st to 3rd and there are 63 others. We all have numbers, but they are not all

sequential because our family originally had 120 members.”

“So I’m supposed to just use the numbers? You three still have the Moira name, but just a number isn’t enough .”

“But we would never be insolent enough to take a name.”

That comment made Miyako tilt her head.

“My mom always says that even machines needed some kind of designator besides a number. …This is a world of living machines, isn’t it? If you’re alive, why should you be counted like you’re dead?”

“But… what should we do?”

Moira 1st was clearly older than Miyako, so Miyako was unsure what to say when she lowered her eyebrows and asked that.

“How about they give themselves names? Or you could give them names. You’re the head maid, right?”

"Hm… There are 63 of them. This country has fifty sound combinations, so by using combinations of two, a suitable number of names can be constructed. …Names like Geru and Gugu are simple enough, right?"

"Stop that. Can't you come up with something cuter?"

"Hm… Can't you think of anything, princess?"

She thought about it. When she occasionally played video games, she would choose a female character.

But she would always play with her real name. Seeing a character with her name level up and defeat the enemies of the final dungeon without breaking a sweat was a wonderful feeling.

"Following that wonderful feeling won't work."

"Are there names that feel wonderful?"

"Play games with your real name and you'll understand."

As she wondered what to do, a light suddenly appeared behind her. She turned around and saw a man

standing in the light. He was over two meters tall and wore a blue apron.

"Master Aigaion, what is it?"

Aigaion nodded and turned toward Miyako.

"I see the new princess is with you. She is being quite …unreserved."

"Don't worry about being polite, old man. …Does that apron belong to a greengrocer in this world?"

Aigaion's laughter filled the air.

"Gyes and I bring in supplies from outside and I took such a liking to the outside world that I live near the train station."

"And do you help out at a greengrocer?"

A sudden thought came to Miyako and she turned toward Moira 1st and her maid outfit.

"Did you choose these maid uniforms for them?"

"Hm? Was that wrong? I was looking for clothes they could use while cooking and cleaning, so I borrowed these form a large dining hall's storeroom late at night."

"Don't go around robbing strange restaurants!"

"Calm down, princess. We quite like these clothes. We look cute in them, don't we?"

"I feel I need to ask: how old are you?"

"Hm… We go through a certain level of formatting every day, so my age would be zero."

"That's cheating."

"Machines are long-lasting. If you replace the old parts , they can live forever." Moira 1st then turned toward Aigaion. "Master Aigaion, do you need something?"

"Yes. We'll be heading out tomorrow morning, so anyone with nothing else to do should handle Cottus and Gyes's normal preparations."

"Cottus?"

"He is the one who caught you after your dive today, princess. Even as large as he is, he is still an automaton."

"I see," said Miyako as she thought about what Aigaion had said.

When he said they were “heading out”, it had to mean more than simply going somewhere.

“Are you heading out to fight?”

“You saw that black god of war, didn’t you? That is the one who destroyed 3rd-Gear, so we cannot forgive it.”

“But isn’t it a human from my world piloting it?”

Aigaion and Moira 1st exchanged a glance and Moira 1st chose her words carefully as she started speaking.

“Princess, we do not want to kill that black god of war. For a variety of reasons, we would like to protect it if possible.”

“It sounds to me like you’re telling me not to interfere.” Miyako smiled bitterly. “It’s true that I want to interfere when I hear about the situation, the various possibilities, and what you can or can’t do. But I don’t know anything about what happened sixty years ago and I’m not a descendant of those involved. I’m trying to keep in mind that I’m a guest from the outside world.”

Miyako recalled the black god of war she had seen the night before. As it had tried to corner Typhon, it had used a powerful lightning strike.

…But Typhon successfully defended against it.

It was not that the black god of war was superior. Given the difference in build, she guessed that the black one was actually the inferior of the two.

…That was a desperate attack.

The pilot of the black god of war had to have his own issues just as the people before her eyes did. She could do nothing but give it some thought and there was only one thing she could say.

"Try to get along."

"Eh?"

"Long ago when I couldn't fit in with those around me , someone told me 'if you can't fit in, at least try to get along'. I knew I couldn't fit in, so I was supposed to resist my desire to cause conflict and truly try to get along with them. …And that's what made me who I am today."

She smiled bitterly.

“It may not be my place to talk when you’ve probably been doing this for thousands of years, but how about giving that a try if you haven’t already? By the way, this is a lecture.”

She looked forward and found Aigaion and Moira 1st staring at her with slightly surprised looks.

“Stop looking at me funny and give me more to drink.”

“Oh, yes. Right away.

“That’s right. Fill it all the way up. And, um, don’t laugh when you look at people, old man.”

“But you are quite amusing. The people of this world truly are amusing, princess.”

“Stop calling me princess. I’m a guest and you can call me Miyako. The princess would be your master’s wife.”

And that master would be the young man she had floored in a single blow earlier. He seemed unreliable, but he also had the same eye color as the yellow light in the god of war's eyes.

"And as a guest, I have some thoughts about all this. I think I'll try to motivate you a bit. Old man, if you work at a greengrocer, can you help me out tomorrow morning ?"

"We will be heading out early tomorrow morning, but if you need something, I can leave a note for the owner. And we should return by noon. Most likely."

"Okay, a working man is a good man. And a good woman helps out around the house. Moira 1st, can you prepare me two things? A note to give to him and documents introducing all of you."

"Yes, right away."

As Moira 1st stood up, Miyako did the same and leaned on the railing in front of her.

The metal railing gently bent into a curve as it supported her weight.

This is a surprisingly soft world, she thought as she looked into the night sky.

She faced the moon floating in the heavens.

"Things around here should be a bit busier tomorrow."

Chapter 10: A Chance Meeting of Questions

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"A Chance Meeting of Questions"

Ask until you run out of questions
Once that happens, there are only two possibilities
Whether you have a full understanding or must give up, there is nothing more to say

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A small room of about ten square meters had a six square meter kitchen attached. The room had no windows, but the gentle light of early morning passed faintly through the walls themselves.

The pale lighting showed books, CDs, and empty bottles of mineral water scattered on the floor.

In the center of the room was a single large object.

It was donut shaped and was at least two meters across. It was made of plastic and the circular space in the center had about thirty centimeters of water inside.

It was a kiddie pool.

Someone was currently asleep while soaking in the pool.

The woman was curled up while facing to the left. Her ears were longer than a human's and her face was submerged. She wore a dress shirt instead of pajamas and her brown hair was soaking wet, but her shoulder and the line down to her stomach were rising and falling above the surface with an incredibly slow rhythm.

"…"

The water suddenly moved as her leg moved below it. The bottom of her foot lightly kicked the inside of the pool.

Ripples filled the pool which said "Ooki" on the side with magic marker.

The small waves struck the ear sticking above the surface and Ooki gave a ticklish expression below.

That was when an electronic tone filled the room. A faint light and a chilly, air-splitting noise came from the kitchen. A cell phone's red light began flashing atop the portable stove that had an unused pot on it.

The sound caused Ooki to close her long ears without waking up. She rejected the sound.

“Nnn…”

But the ringing continued from the kitchen.

This continued for a few minutes. After some more time dozing, she slowly raised her closed ear.

She stuck it wholly out of the water and noticed the sound had not stopped.

“…”

She frowned in displeasure below the water, but she still got up.

“Fweh?”

With a gentle splashing noise, she sat up without brushing her wet hair from her sleepy face and with her shirt sticking to her bare skin. Her listless eyes stared at the duck toy floating on the water.

But the ringing continued from the kitchen.

"Quiet down."

She slowly stood up with a sleepy look in her eyes and water dripped down from her.

"So tired…"

She wobbled a bit, but she managed to brush up her hair and step forward. The wooden floor instantly absorbed the water that fell from her skin. She arrived in the kitchen in seven steps and picked up the cell phone.

"Ooki-sama? This is Sibyl from Team Leviathan."

Oh… thought Ooki.

Her brain was not functioning very well, but she tried to remember what she should say.

"Ahh ah…"

It seemed like Sibyl nodded.

"Testament. You woke up quickly today. This was seven minutes faster than yesterday."

She praised me. Yay! she thought, but her body would not keep up. *Sayama-kun and the others are always so full of energy in the morning. I wish I was like that.*

…Then again, I'm not sure I'd like it.

As she thought, her brain started moving bit by bit. She gave a weak laugh and asked a question.

"Um… What is it?"

"Testament. Are you listening?"

"Hm, I guess so."

"Testament. Then I shall keep this short. …You are late . Please hurry to UCAT."

"Hweh?"

Ooki looked to the clock on the kitchen wall.

"Ooki-sama, your kitchen clock had been stopped at 2: 30 three months ago. You yourself said you need to put in new batteries, but what time does it give you now?"

"2:30."

"Testament. It is actually approximately two hours after that. Ooshiro-sama is already here."

"Eh? It's 4:30? I don't go to school until seven and why is Ooshiro-san at the school?"

After a few seconds, Sibyl cleared her throat.

"Starting last week, Japanese UCAT headquarters has been working with Kansai UCAT to search for any philosopher's stone reactions. Team Leviathan is helping and you are in charge of concept related operations. Also, your shift is four to seven both AM and PM."

"Really?"

"Testament. You were told at the initial meeting and each morning at around this time. Today, we have detected a faint reaction in Kansai, so it is possible another flying object will appear."

"Oh, I see. But have I really been doing that job?"

"Testament. Normally, it takes you about five more minutes to remember this recent job. And then you always shout an apology."

"Oh, is that so? …Ah! I'm sorry!!"

"That was a few minutes early. Have you finally woken up?"

She had, so she frantically held the cell phone with her shoulder.

"D-don't worry! I'm on my way now!"

"Ooki-sama, are you a soba restaurant?"

"No, no, no, no."

She put on her work heels and realized she would need to work at UCAT past seven to make up for being so late. She prepared herself to be late for school.

But that worried her because this was the final day of the first term. If she was late or absent, would the children be able to continue homeroom smoothly? She had read in the newspaper that modern children were

poor at working in groups and tended to quickly make mistakes. She did not think that would be a problem with her students.

"But I'm still worried. Especially with a certain few."

With that serious comment, she finished putting on her heels, opened the door, and left.

Outside was a mountain road through a forest. The morning air and light soaked into her body after passing through the surrounding trees.

Behind her was a giant wall made of wood.

Looking up, she found a large tree towering up in the forest. Its trunk was at least twenty meters across and it was her home.

"I really have grown up."

The door at the base led to a living space modelled after the apartments she had seen in newspaper ads. She had created the interior after becoming conscious and being able to go outside. The space's child string vibration was the same as her own. She told her students she lived in an apartment, but no one else could see the

door or go inside. Oddly enough, roaches still managed to find their way in.

Even so, she never forgot to shut the door behind her or to shut off the new model of electromagnetic relay device installed in the trunk.

She reached for her waist pocket she always kept the key in.

“Huh?”

It was not there. Both the key and the pocket itself were missing. Just as she began wondering where she had dropped the pocket, a voice came from the cell phone on her shoulder.

“Ooki-sama, you forgot to change into your clothes as usual.”

Two people rode a single motorcycle down an early morning road.

The sky was clear and the eastern sun was to their side as they travelled south.

The motorcycle was right next to the sidewalk and Izumo moved it forward by foot with the clutch disengaged. Kazami sat behind him in a T-shirt and hoodie and held a large rucksack.

Sayama and Shinjou walked along the sidewalk in their school uniforms.

Sayama checked his watch and Baku peered at it from his chest, but it was still before seven.

“I did not expect the Hiba boy to call us here this morning. Is he not afraid of Kazami?”

“Chisato, don’t kick him. The recoil would knock the bike over into the lane of traffic.”

“Kaku, I hadn’t started to do anything yet.”

“Yet?” asked Shinjou. Kazami turned toward her, so she frantically waved her hands. “N-nothing. I didn’t say anything. I wasn’t wondering if you were planning to do something. A-a-anyway, um… Did Ryuuji-kun really ask us to stop by in the morning?”

“He probably chose a time when no one else would be here. He also said he wanted to show us something.”

"I see." Shinjou nodded and tilted her head. "What kind of person was he?"

Kazami looked up into the sky with a distant look in her eyes.

"He looks obedient enough, but I think he needs a decent beating."

"Chisato, stop expressing everything through violence. You'd be a wonderful girl if it weren't for that."

"C-c'mon, stop complimenting me like that."

She sent a left hook into the side of Izumo's head to hide her embarrassment.

Instead of a scream, Izumo gave an awkward grunt and collapsed into the lane of traffic along with the motorcycle.

"Ah," said Kazami as she jumped from the motorcycle, but Izumo landed sprawled out on the road.

A moment later the tires of a 12-ton dump truck grazed his hair as it travelled at well above the speed limit.

He frantically stood up amid the rumble of its engine and the shaking of the ground.

“Whoa! Y-you idiot, your flirting almost killed me!”

“That is quite an absurd cause of death,” sighed Sayama before spreading his palms to either side. “ Seeing the current state of this indecent couple has me worried about your future.”

“Wow,” said Shinjou with a feigned smile. “You can actually worry about others, Sayama-kun?”

Izumo righted the motorcycle, made sure the stopper had not broken, got back on, and sighed. Kazami apologized and sat behind him.

“Anyway, about Hiba. Wouldn’t you know more, Sayama? You were both students of the Hiba Dojo, right? ”

"I attended that bizarre dojo starting in middle school, but I only ever ran across him once or twice a year. According to the other long-time students, Hiba-sensei would take time out to teach him techniques he did not teach the others."

Sayama recalled the black god of war from the other night.

"What did you think of him after speaking with him? To get right to the point, do you think he is dangerous?"

"I'm not sure. He didn't really seem like a bad person. If anything, he seemed to like people too much. He's the type who would definitely go buy you a can of coffee if you asked him. He wouldn't if you ordered him, though. "

Sayama smiled bitterly at that last comment.

"The kind of person that draws that kind of line can be the most frightening."

"There's more." Izumo nodded and shrugged. "That kid made a call on his cell phone after we finished speaking yesterday. And he called the person Mikage."

"You mean…?"

"Yes. He's slightly perverted, but the girl he cares for comes first. I'm the same, so I think we can get along!"

"You take it a lot further than just 'slightly' perverted!"

Sayama ignored Kazami's shouting and actions. He wrapped an arm around Shinjou's shoulders and walked forward. Behind him, he could hear flesh being struck, metal bending, and countless dump trucks driving by, but he paid it no heed.

"S-Sayama-kun? I'm not sure how to describe the sounds behind us. Wham and smash don't do it justice."

"Shinjou-kun, stop relying on onomatopoeia. And this scene is too brutal for practicing verbal descriptions. Let us continue on. The Hiba house should be just up ahead, so how about it?"

Shinjou let out a breath in his arm, her shoulders drooped, and she suddenly looked around the area.

She took a city map from the binder in her arms.

"Um, we're going to the Hiba family house, right? Yeah, it should be around here… It's pretty close to the school."

As soon as she spoke, they heard an engine in front of them.

They both looked forward and saw a boy riding a motorcycle which had a sidecar.

"Huh? Harakawa-kun?"

"Hey," said the boy as he stopped the motorcycle.

Their classmate Harakawa turned toward them. His wavy black hair was swept back, he had brown skin, and he wore his school uniform roughly.

"What are you two doing out this early?"

"We are on a student council job to save the world."

"Oh, that sounds important. Are the perverted president and violent treasurer not with you?"

Sayama turned back, realized those two and their motorcycle had vanished from the road at some point, and heard the dull sounds of mounted punches coming from the thicket of a park next to the sidewalk. A close examination showed Izumo's leg sticking out from the thicket and shaking along with the irregular sounds of impact.

"They seem to be busy," he said after turning back to Harakawa.

"Sayama Mikoto, I hate how that sounds like the truth when you say it."

After giving a bitter smile, Harakawa looked back and forth between Shinjou and Sayama.

"I see you two are getting along well."

"Ha ha ha. Why of course. Every morning, I help develop Shinjou-kun's bodily awareness by-…"

"Waaah!! How many times do I have to tell you not to say that in front of people!?"

She tightened his tie down to the base.

He had been in the middle of laughing, so his vision suddenly started to shake, but he quickly removed her hands. As she frantically tried to strangle him, he began struggling against her hands and the tie.

"H-Harakawa-kun, what are you doing here?" she asked while dealing with his hands. "I thought you lived in the other direction."

"Shinjou-kun, a criminal tends to avoid the scene of his crimes."

"Stop making things up, Sayama Mikoto. I was bringing some parts to an underclassman named Hiba."

Hearing that, Shinjou finally stopped trying to grab the tie.

She turned toward Sayama, nodded once, and then looked back at Harakawa.

"Th-then you're on your way to school now? We only have the closing ceremony today, so isn't it a bit early?"

"It is, but I have to clean up my stuff in the automobile club and I have work right after the closing ceremony ends."

"I see. But you never got your job approval sticker because you skipped the final homeroom the other day, right? Ooki-sensei has it, so you should probably get it before she forgets what it is and sticks it on her lectern."

"What is she, a child? Anyway, I can still work without approval, Shinjou Setsu." Harakawa smiled bitterly and shook the bracelet on his arm in displeasure. "More importantly, I know you two understand, so can you tell Ooki-sensei to stop asking about me at the hospital? My mom's gonna find out I'm skipping classes. …Also tell her to stop calling my cell when I'm at work just because she can't remember how to get home."

"You tell her yourself, Harakawa. That is your duty as a student."

"Is that so?" With another bitter smile, he moved his motorcycle forward to continue past them. "Oh, and one other thing. Pay attention to who's watching when you put your arms around each other's shoulders. Not everyone is as accepting as I am."

Shinjou lowered her shoulders and blushed while Sayama simply nodded.

"Never fear. I do not feel embarrassment."

"That's called having no shame!"

"Calm down, calm down."

With his arm still around her shoulders, Sayama began walking forward once more. As they heard the motorcycle drive off into the distance, a new sight reached them.

Amid the two-story houses was a blue-roofed house with a boy polishing a motorcycle in front.

Also, a girl with long, blonde hair sat in a wheelchair next to him.

Sayama approached Hiba and the boy looked up in realization.

He frantically stood and then bowed.

Meanwhile, Shinjou whispered to Sayama from his arm.

"Don't say anything too weird, okay? This is more or less our first time speaking with him, so start with a topic you have in common. Like motorcycles or something."

"No need to worry. I already have the perfect topic in mind."

Shinjou breathed a sigh of relief and he nodded.

He raised a hand toward Hiba and charmingly greeted him with a topic they had in common.

"Good morning, slightly perverted Hiba Ryuuji-kun! I am well aware that you are slightly perverted. But do not worry! I too am a boy, so feel free to discuss- Wait, Hiba boy! Why are you running away!?"

Someone began strangling him from the side.

Even early in the morning, the development department and armories on the second basement of Okutama UCAT was filled with activity.

This was due to the announcement from Ooki being sent to only that department.

"Um… It looks like there are some philosopher's stone readings around Akigawa. Three of them. This looks suspicious, so it would be appreciated if you prepared some equipment."

Tsukuyomi had been up all night using her computer, but she managed to react now.

She stood up and spoke to all of those already preparing inside their partitions.

"Despite what Miss Ooki would make you think, this might actually be really bad. Remain on standby and prepare the anti-concept equipment for ground combat! We might have to break into a concept space, so prepare the assault models!"

Multiple voices voiced their understanding, so she snapped her fingers and began walking toward the large door out into the corridor.

As the others left their partitions and followed her, she barked instructions.

"Those remaining in the department are to be on standby state 3! We don't know what unit will be selected in an emergency, so carry out all necessary equipment as if this were training! And anyone with nothing else to do should clean the armories! We don't bring everything out very often, so this is our chance. Prepare the vacuums you can stick in the gaps on the pallets!"

She threw open the door to the corridor and those gathered behind her began to run. They were on their way to the armories, the maintenance team's floor, and the equipment elevator room. Those still in the room contacted the other departments needed to move the equipment and ensured they could operate smoothly as an organization.

The corridor walls opened and the auxiliary equipment transport rails leading to the equipment elevator room appeared. The workers in the corridor divided into an inside and outside team as Tsukuyomi watched on.

They opened the doors to the armories, removed the weapon pallets from the inner garage, placed them on the rails, and sent them off. The larger pallets were set on

the main equipment transport rails which led directly to the surface and they were rushed to those who needed them. The rails screeched as the pallets moved quickly to the standby post on the surface.

"Hurry it up! You! If it needs thawing, shove it in the large oven!"

As Tsukuyomi spoke, everyone around her ran off in different directions.

"This is going well," she muttered.

At that moment, Kashima moved past her while scratching his head. He too had stayed up all night. He was in charge of swords and blades and was on the way to his subordinates.

"Ah, Kashima!"

"Oh, yes. What is it?"

A moment after asking, he pulled out his laptop with a look of realization.

"I understand, Director Tsukuyomi! You want to see how much my Harumi has grown to soothe the tension,

don't you? L-look at this amazing and valuable footage! She's so interested in this toy!"

With a stiff smile, Tsukuyomi strongly grasped the laptop with just the thumb and forefinger of her right hand. She then threw it to the floor with a snap of the wrist.

"Ahhhhh! I only just finished editing today's Haru-chan collection!"

"Pipe down. This is an emergency. More importantly, um…well…"

"Is it about Atsuta?"

"Yes, that's right. Where is that idiot?"

"That creature has been in Niigata for the last three days."

"What? Is there something there?"

"Only in his mind. He said the Sea of Japan was calling him."

"Tell him to go during the winter next time! And here I was hoping to send him against a god of war so I could see him beaten to a pulp."

Kashima pushed his glasses to the top of his nose with a serious look.

"A god of war?"

"Testament."

A cool voice seemed to ignore all the surrounding activity.

Tsukuyomi and everyone else turned toward the corridor entrance and found a woman standing there.

"Sibyl of the maintenance department."

"Testament. But I am currently here as a member of Team Leviathan."

As Sibyl walked forward, she was already wearing her white armored uniform and her brisk gait caused her skirt to flip up and cut through the wind.

"Are you listening? While Ooki of Team Leviathan was randomly operating our machinery, she discovered a few philosopher's stone reactions near the city of Akigawa. There are three and all of them are god of war class. They have been judged to be 3rd-Gear's combat automatons known as the Hecatoncheires."

"Judged? How? Did you check their child string vibrations?"

"Testament. It was my decision."

With a smile, Sibyl passed by Tsukuyomi and slowly raised her right hand.

"Please bring out my pallet from block eighteen on the fifth basement. Other than that, I only need enough personnel to transport it."

"W-wait a minute. The fifth basement?"

"Do not be so surprised. With the Leviathan Road underway, Team Leviathan's armory is bound to be used more frequently. And even it is less strictly guarded than the storage vault containing Georgious and Concept Core weapons whose exact location is unknown and is directly controlled by Ooshiro-sama."

Still smiling, Sibyl turned toward Tsukuyomi, nodded, and spoke to all the others who had stopped to listen.

"With the authority of Team Leviathan, let me assure you that this battle will occur within a concept space. Please assist me in bringing it to an end."

Shinjou and Sayama moved to the side of the Hiba house.

The area was similar to an alleyway. A two meter area of dirt existed between the trees and fence surrounding the Hiba house and the concrete wall surrounding the neighboring house.

Sayama looked through the dimly lit alley from a step ahead of Shinjou.

"Why must we speak here? Do you feel guilty about something, slightly perverted Hiba boy?"

Hiba was panting for breath after frantically pushing the girl's wheelchair to the alley and he glared at Shinjou and Sayama.

"Wh-where did you hear about that? Peeking up that skirt in the past yesterday was just a bit of curiosity."

"But… If you think about it, that was Mikage-san's mother he was peeking at."

"Shinjou-kun, you must not say that. If you say boys at his age feel their heart race when they notice a girl, it may sound pure enough, but it would be more accurate to say they act like dogs."

"Stop whispering to each other!"

Shinjou looked over and saw Mikage suspiciously staring at Hiba.

She held a cane to help her walk and she used it to jab at him, so he frantically turned a smile in her direction.

"I-it seems these people are mistaken about some things. Okay, Mikage-san? Okay?"

"He's trying to trick her," muttered Shinjou with a half-lidded glare, but she then tilted her head and stepped up to Sayama's left. "Um, I take it that girl is Mikage-san."

"Yes," he said while turning her wheelchair toward them. "That's right. You have heard the details concerning her, right?"

"Yes. She was born sixty years ago and we heard what Cronus-san did to her in the other world. Is all that true?"

Mikage tilted her head weakly and turned to Hiba.

She spoke to Hiba instead of Shinjou and she spoke with exaggerated silent mouth movements. They had heard about this from Kazami over the phone the day before. It was part of Mikage's incomplete evolution.

After Mikage finished speaking, Hiba tilted his head.

"Will you show them?"

Mikage nodded.

She faced Shinjou and Sayama once more. She was wearing a white turtleneck and a beige dress. Both were a bit big for her, so they looked baggy.

She raised her right hand and removed the white glove.

Shinjou spoke what it was that was revealed below the glove.

"A doll…"

Mikage's right hand was made from a beige material that almost looked white. The flexible points at the joints were made from a black material and were the same as the soft armor on UCAT armored uniforms. As her fingers moved, black curves formed on the skin of her hand.

Still silent, she lowered her turtleneck's collar.

Her neck was the same. It had a lot of flexible points, so the connection between her neck and breastbone was almost entirely black.

She expressionlessly opened her mouth and said something. Hiba read her lips and spoke in her stead.

"Do you need to see anything more to confirm the truth of the past?"

Hiba's quiet words produced a reflexive shake of the head from Shinjou. She was well aware of how frightening it could be to show someone your body.

"That's the body of an automaton that is evolving into a human."

Shinjou fell silent and thought about the past she had seen the night before.

If what she had heard there was accurate, Cronus had given Mikage the god of war intended to be a spare for Typhon.

Hiba seemed to pick up on her thoughts because he nodded.

"Mikage-san was given Susamikado, a god of war meant to be Typhon's spare and which was modelled after my grandfather's Susahito Custom. Cronus placed it in a concept space that her body can draw it from." He took a breath. "But the half of the Concept Core is not contained within Susamikado because it could make her evolution unstable. It is instead sealed within Keravnos, Susamikado's special armament. In Greek mythology, that was the heavenly lightning Zeus used to seal Typhon."

Sayama replied from Shinjou's right by holding up his left hand as a sign to stop.

"Susamikado? That is the first time we have heard its name. …This seems like a good opportunity." He snapped his fingers to show he was changing the subject. "It may be a sudden question, but could you tell us about the final battle with 3rd-Gear?"

Shinjou was taken aback.

She remembered what the automaton named #4 had said the day before.

…There are aspects of 3rd-Gear's destruction that those automatons don't know.

He was pursuing the answer to those questions.

She turned to face him and he spoke expressionlessly.

"We obtained a fair bit of information yesterday, but a lot is unclear about that part. I would like to know about it."

Sayama saw Hiba frown and tilt his head.

"Why do you want to know that all of a sudden?"

There was no need to give a detailed answer to that question.

"A certain individual asked me for that information and I want to know. Why is 3rd-Gear still fighting? From what I heard, the Gear's survivor, Apollo, is a pacifist, but-…"

"Nonsense." Hiba laughed and cut him off. "Then what do you suggest? Surely you don't think 3rd-Gear is fighting because I'm attacking them to gain the Concept Core and speed up Mikage-san's evolution."

"That is certainly one way of looking at it."

"Well, it isn't true. Five years ago, they picked a fight with us. A god of war suddenly appeared before us and attacked. That was when Mikage-san first called in Susamikado." He hung his head a bit and placed a hand on his white bandanna. "Sorry. I can't say anymore. But ever since then, we've been fighting them. Recently, we've been intentionally flying through the Kansai region to call them out, but we still haven't narrowed down the location of their headquarters beyond the general region of Okayama."

"I see," said Sayama with a nod.

How strange, he thought with a renewed understanding of the importance of #4's question.

If his fight had begun five years ago and had continued like that, it meant there had not been a single chance for negotiation. If Apollo was a pacifist, why had he attacked first and why did he allow continued fighting when it was not improving the situation? It was possible that those around him were acting on their own.

…But that means those following him have a reason to prioritize these attacks over their master's wishes.

He did not understand, so he stopped thinking about it.

…Any more conjecture would be dangerous.

He turned back to Hiba whose head was apologetically lowered.

"As for your previous question, I don't know much about my grandfather's generation. All I know is that he entered 3rd and that he returned used Susamikado which carried a heavily damaged Susahito Custom. And

afterwards, Mikage-san's reflexive mechanisms were used as an intermediary for the controller of a giant machine known as Susaou." He nodded. "Also, I do not know where Mikage-san was sleeping until ten years ago ."

"Then you know nothing about the result of 3rd-Gear' s final battle?"

"I know the result, but I don't know how it happened. "

"Can you tell us the result?"

"What exactly do you want to know?"

How cautious, thought Sayama as he felt the resistance there and decided to ask it all at once.

"I would like to know what happened to Apollo. At the time, he should have been piloting a pale blue god of war. Typhon was made exclusively for him and it is active now, so why did he switch machines?"

Hiba hesitated for a moment, but finally spoke.

"I don't know why that is either."

He gave an exaggerated shrug and Sayama nodded mentally.

Shinjou poked her elbow into his side and spoke so only he could hear.

"He managed to avoid answering, but you asked too much all at once."

"No, that reply told me a lot. This was plenty."

Hiba had taken the bait splendidly and Sayama planned to later reveal what he had learned and be praised for it.

…Compliments from Shinjou-kun are a truly wonderful thing.

Hiba gave him a suspicious look, so he spoke once more.

"Now, let us get back on topic."

"Please do."

"Very well. Mikage-kun, you do not remember the past, do you?"

Mikage nodded.

Sayama saw the ends of Shinjou's eyebrows lower at that nod.

…Shinjou-kun does not remember her past either.

They both knew nothing of their parents, but Shinjou had seen Mikage's mother the day before. That may have been why her eyebrows had lowered.

And so Sayama asked Hiba something else.

"Have you told Mikage-kun about the past we saw yesterday?"

"Yes. I would like to thank you for that. It was a valuable record of her mother."

Shinjou's eyebrows moved partially back up.

No need to be so nosy, he thought. *She already has someone to worry for her.*

"Then let me make something clear," said Sayama. " We have the ability to see the past. Would that ability be an effective bargaining chip against you?"

Shinjou trembled when she heard that.

"S-Sayama-kun!"

Shinjou's hurried and emotional voice showed she felt they must not do that.

"We can't! That's someone's past! People want to know about their past and we can't take advantage of that."

"Oh? Please do not take negotiations too lightly, Shinjou-kun. I am not taking advantage of that desire." He looked her directly in the eye without looking away. "There is something we want to know about as well. If he uses that as a bargaining chip against us, would you view that as him taking advantage of our desire for knowledge? If it is exchanged for something of equivalent value, it makes a splendid bargaining chip."

"B-but…" Her lips twisted down and she tightly grasped his left arm. "I don't like that kind of deal."

Her voice trembled and something welled up in the corners of her eyes.

Changing his plan because someone cried would accomplish nothing, so he would follow his own principles.

However, the tears in her eyes brought a smile to his face and relief to his heart.

“That is another way in which you are right, Shinjou-kun.”

“Eh?”

Strength left the hand she held him with.

After a breath, Sayama brushed up his hair with his right hand and waited for Shinjou’s breathing to calm down.

“Then how about I make a small alteration, Shinjou-kun?”

He faced Hiba who looked slightly tense.

"What if I state it like this: if we work together, you will surely be able to see the past much like before. … What do you say now, Hiba boy? Will you gain nothing and fight 3rd-Gear while hindering our actions or will you view the past and fight 3rd-Gear while meddling in our actions? Which will it be?"

He nodded.

"I am inviting you to join us."

…Join us?

Shinjou mouthed what Sayama had said and grasped its meaning.

…He's letting Ryuuji-kun join us?

What did that mean? First, she thought about the positive elements.

1. UCAT would gain a new god of war.

2. Team Leviathan would gain a new member and its connections to the National Defense Department would grow.

3. Having more people her own age – especially an underclassman – would make her happy.

Then she thought about the negative elements.

1. She was nervous about inviting in an outsider.

2. What would he think once he discovered her identity?

3. Would he fall victim to Kazami's attacks or Izumo and Sayama's bad influence?

She weighed the pros and cons. The positives were decent. The first negative would become clearer later, the second was an issue of her own feelings, and the third was something he would just have to put up with.

"Sayama-kun, my opinion of you has improved a bit. Oh, but…only just a bit, okay?"

"Ha ha ha. Feel free to praise me even more. There have been so many misunderstandings about me lately that my satisfaction meter has been running past its limit. Anyway, Hiba boy."

"Y-yes?"

He took a shallow defensive stance in front of Mikage which surprised Shinjou. *He protects her so naturally,* she thought while glancing over at Sayama. But he was currently focused on Hiba.

"Listen. Currently, anyone who joins us gets to join the student council as well. How does assistant treasurer sound?"

"Assistant treasurer? I-I couldn't. That would put me right next to the school's greatest fighter!"

"In a way, you'd be a step away from great influence. Not that you'd be able to control it. But I think you would do fine, Hiba-kun. You'd be able to dodge the attacks."

"I notice you aren't denying anything I said…"

"Do not worry about it, Hiba boy. Now, choose one of the following options: A) Become my servant. B) Beg to be a servant of the great Sayama. C) Do my bidding for the rest of your life."

"How about 'D) None of the above, asshole'?"

Hiba scratched at his head.

"Anyway, I'm not sure what to say about joining you."

After speaking, Hiba turned toward Mikage. Both the ends of her eyebrows and her entire head were slightly lowered.

…She's a little cautious.

Recently, they had been showing people and telling people what had previously been their secret.

She had coolly shown off her body, but she likely had some other thoughts about it. *I need to keep that in mind,* he thought.

The other night when they had been taken in by UCAT , he had spoken a lot with an old man in a lab coat as well as a young man with black clothes and white hair who had been accompanied by a maid. Mikage had shown them her hand and the maid had shown her arm.

…That was a strange organization.

Automatons and humans worked together there.

…If we joined them, could Mikage-san have more freedom?

But Hiba shook his head and decided it was too soon to say.

"At the moment, I only want one thing: please understand that we are already dealing with 3rd-Gear," he said. "About five years after Mikage-san woke up, they began attacking us. We used to have our hands full just fighting them off, but after destroying several remotely controlled gods of war, the true prize finally started showing up."

"And so you are claiming that as your target?"

Hiba nodded, circled behind the wheelchair, and held the handles.

He looked at Mikage's impaired legs.

"We have half of 3rd-Gear's Concept Core and they have the other half. If we get that, Mikage-san-…"

"…might become human," finished Shinjou.

He saw her hold her body a bit. It was a casual action, but something about the situation must have gotten through to her. She then turned toward Sayama.

"What should we do? If they have half of the Concept Core, obtaining 3rd-Gear's half won't end the Leviathan Road."

"Indeed." Sayama crossed his arms. "It is a tricky issue . It comes down to which side will give in and how."

Silence followed.

What a heavy silence, thought Hiba.

Neither side intended to back down.

…What do I do…?

Suddenly, he saw a bit of motion.

The small animal on Sayama's shoulder had crossed its arms just like Sayama.

Mikage's shoulders began to shake and she let out an amused laugh.

"…"

The laugh had been out of place, but it was not often that she laughed. That was why Hiba smiled as he supported her from behind the wheelchair.

But Sayama and Shinjou had not seen the source of the laugh.

"Ah."

After a moment, Shinjou caught on and smiled. Sayama then did the same. Baku looked back and forth between them and crossed its stubby arms even further.

"Baku must want to join the conversation."

Sayama smiled bitterly and moved his foot casually to the side, but it struck something.

“Hm?”

He looked down at the base of the trees surrounding the house and found a thirty centimeter metal stake.

“What is this?”

“That is a protective stake with a philosopher’s stone inside. It suppresses the power of machines. The effective range is small, so we can move around them, but a god of war would not be able to.”

“So you use these as protective charms for your home? ”

“Yes, but the neighborhood dogs and cats like to dig them up. I need to put that one back.”

Once Hiba picked up the stake and looked at it, his expression changed.

The top of it was smashed.

“Eh?” said Shinjou.

"The dogs and cats around here must be quite something," said Sayama. "They appear to be able to break metal."

"Yes, I'm surprised too. …Except that's clearly not what happened!"

Hiba looked around and found more stakes lying under the trees surrounding the house. They had all been dug up such that an outsider would not notice.

"They're all broken."

Hiba trembled as a chill ran down his spine and Sayama glanced around.

"Is that concept limited to gods of war?"

"Because Mikage-san lives here, it primarily affects large objects."

"Then I take it an automaton would be just fine. An automaton that can function in Low-Gear. And now that these are gone…"

"A god of war is coming!?"

Hiba looked through the trees and toward his house. With his mother out, it was empty, but there were two people standing in front of it.

One was a black-haired woman in a red suit and the other was a large man wearing a greengrocer's apron.

The woman stood out front and she took a step to the side while jerking her chin over toward the man.

This isn't good, thought Hiba as he prepared himself for a fight.

The man bent over and pressed the intercom button.

"Ma'am, this is 3rd-Gear. We have a battle to deliver."

The woman raised both arms and Hiba saw giant swords appear behind her.

The blades were rectangular, they were over five meters long, and there were a total of six lined up.

"_____!"

The woman let out a shout and a red form appeared between her and the swords.

"A god of war!?"

As if Shinjou's cry had been the signal, the six swords smashed into Hiba's house.

The instantaneous attack crashed through the house and created an explosion.

"…!"

The sudden turn of events led Hiba to take a battle pose.

As he prepared to fight, he tried to choose his partner. He reached a hand toward Mikage's hand, but that hand found only empty air.

He looked at her through the stench of burning wood, scattering fragments, and smoke of the explosion.

But she was gone. Her empty wheelchair and cane were all that remained.

"…Eh?"

He blankly wondered why because this had never happened before.

They had been together for many long years, so how had she disappeared and where was she?

“What are you doing, Hiba boy? It seems 3rd-Gear has a thing for abductions because they have taken Mikage-kun this time. As soon as they attacked the house with those swords, they expanded a concept space and brought only Mikage-kun in with them!”

Sayama yelled at him while brushing aside the explosive blast and smoke with a wave of his hand and then he pointed at the empty wheelchair.

“She is right there waiting for you. Prepare to enter the concept space and fight!”

Chapter 11: Running Metal

Chapter 11

“Running Metal”

Pursue, pursue
Bring your speed out below the sky

Pursue, pursue

Bring your speed out below the sky

Below the blue sky, a single motion filled the city that had yet to get going in the morning.

Two boys had two motorcycles idling in front of a destroyed two-story house with a red roof.

The motorcycles belonged to Hiba and Izumo. They were both old, but they were 1 liter models and the two of them together produced a low drum-like rumbling. Sayama had helped Izumo remove Hiba's sidecar and now he walked over to Shinjou who had nothing to do.

"How is the Hiba boy?"

"He went around the neighborhood telling people there was a gas explosion that caused their underground garage to cave-in."

"I suppose UCAT will contact his mother and the police. Disguised police cars should be arriving soon, so that only leaves us."

"Sayama! Shinjou! We're ready over here! How about you!?"

Kazami stood up next to the motorcycle with motor oil on her cheek.

However, she heard no response from Sayama or Shinjou. Instead, she heard Sayama's cell phone.

Everyone turned toward the boy and he lightly raised his hand while pulling out the black phone. He made sure to activate speaker phone.

"It's me. Shinjou-kun and two miscellaneous others are with me."

"Yes, yes. Tes, tes. This is your teacher."

"Oh, what is it, Ooki-sensei? Are you informing us you will be late? Isn't it a bit early for that? Ha ha ha. And how can you justify being late on the final day of the first term?"

"That isn't it. Um, is there a huge concept space where you are by any chance?"

Strength filled everyone's gazes when they heard that.

As the early morning wind blew through, Sayama asked Ooki a question.

"I see. Are you actually doing your job this morning, Ooki-sensei? Congratulations. You have taken one step up the staircase to normalcy. I fear you will soon trip and fall down several steps, though."

"Wah! Why are you always like this, Sayama-kun! You 're going to make me angry!"

"Then be angry."

"I am!"

"Are you quite done?"

"Tes. That's enough anger for me."

To his right, Shinjou doubtfully pointed at her own head and rotated the finger, but Sayama ignored it. He had been well aware of that since the previous year.

"Now, Ooki-sensei, please give me the details. I believe we are right in front of it."

"Oh, right, right. It feels kinda 3rd-Gear-ish. Sibyl-san is preparing to head out, but do all of you have your string watches?"

Sayama looked down at the black UCAT watch on his wrist. Shinjou and Kazami did the same.

"Ah?"

But Izumo tilted his head and showed off his empty wrists with a stiff smile.

"This ain't good. In my defense, no one told me to wear it today."

"I'll be nice and point out that Kaku never wears a watch or carries a cell phone when he isn't out on a mission."

"Ha ha ha. If you insist on rejecting modern society, you should go live in the mountains of Okutama. You can live in the wild with an old man who rejects human morality and a teacher who rejects the concept of time."

"I-I actually woke up this morning!"

They all ignored Ooki's comment.

Kazami folded her arms as she wondered what to do, but Shinjou held out her watch.

"Izumo-san, why don't you use mine?"

Everyone turned toward her with questioning eyes, so she shrunk back a bit.

"U-um, if you think about it, I probably wouldn't have anything to do in there. Without Ex-St, I can't shoot at anything, so…um…"

"What are you saying, Shinjou-kun? With you by my side, my motivation increases eightfold!"

"Shinjou, give me your watch before Sayama does anything stupid."

"Eh? Why you, Kazami-san?"

"Think about it, Shinjou-kun," cut in Sayama. "If Izumo placed your watch around his filthy wrist, it would be infected with the Izumo virus and it would

make you very strange and perverted. On second thought, that sounds wonderful."

"Yeah, it's because I had a feeling that crazy boy would say something like that."

"You're right," said Shinjou as she handed Kazami the watch.

Kazami handed her watch to Izumo, put on Shinjou's watch, and placed a hand on the stem of the watch.

"Listen, Kaku. We need to initialize the automatically recorded child string vibration. Just press this switch. … No, not there. Oh, c'mon. You have to know that isn't right either. Yes, now push it all the way in."

"Is that anything to say on an early morning road?" commented Sayama.

"Eh? Okay, now it will automatically read in a new vibration just like when you first put one on."

Kazami and Izumo lightly twisted the watches to make sure they were on right.

Sayama nodded, but Shinjou looked worried.

"What is it, Shinjou?"

She nodded and turned toward the figure behind them .

It was Hiba. He had added a jacket and goggles to his outfit and his expression was serious.

"What should I do? I can't enter concept spaces without Mikage-san's Susamikado."

He received an immediate answer from Sayama.

"Use my watch, Hiba boy. You are likely more normal than Izumo."

"I'm not sure what that last part means, but are you sure? You're Team Leviathan's representative, aren't you ?"

"The high-mobility S&M couple behind me is in charge of fighting. From the looks of them, I doubt the two we saw possess the Concept Core, so there will be no room for negotiation. Act as violently as you wish and retrieve that which is important to you. And you will be indebted to me for lending you this watch. Not a bad deal, don't you think?"

After a short pause, Hiba smiled bitterly.

"I can't argue with that," he said as he took the watch with a smile. "But you shouldn't be so open about trying to make someone indebted to you. Anyway, how does this work?"

"You press this switch here. …No, not there. No, that isn't right either. Yes, now push it all the way in."

"Sayama-kun, I think you're getting even crazier."

"Hm?"

By the time Sayama turned around, Hiba had finished operating the watch.

At the same time, Ooki spoke from his phone.

"The new child string vibrations just arrived and there's one I don't recognize. And from the look of Kazami-san's, she has an upset stomach. You shouldn't snack late at night."

"She's right…"

Kazami held her stomach with a displeased look and Sayama nodded in understanding.

"Ooki-sensei, can you get them inside?"

"Yes, yes. UCAT is about to interfere with the concept space in order to send in those wearing the watches and to prepare for Sibyl-san's entry. We didn't make this one, so please don't remove the watches. Who knows what will happen if your stability is thrown a bit off."

Kazami's expression stiffened at the mention of Sibyl.

Izumo patted her on the back and she nodded and returned to her normal expression.

"What about our weapons?"

"It seems Sibyl-san is loading V-Sw, G-Sp2, and Ex-St on a transport helicopter. Once she arrives, the detailed concept space data she takes will be used to let the others in without watches. Is that okay?"

"Testament," replied Sayama and Ooki continued.

"The shape of the concept space seems to have been modified. It's an upside down funnel shape with a

diameter of two kilometers. The end of the funnel reaches about 15 kilometers into the air. The enemy uses that to escape detection by travelling through Low-Gear at 12 or 13 kilometers up."

"And without seeing inside the concept space, we cannot wait for them where they will exit. Our only choice is to settle this inside."

"After meeting up with Sayama-kun and Shinjou-kun, Sibyl-san will enter from the northwest. Izumo-kun, your group should-…"

"Head in from here, right? That way we can cut them off from the south."

Kazami straddled Izumo's motorcycle and slid her butt to the back.

"Sensei, tell Sibyl to leave our weapons on the open pallet at the launch area."

"Eh? Really?"

"Yes. Those cute things want to be with us enough that they'll come to us on their own. And Hiba, do you have a weapon?"

"Yes. A sword with a philosopher's stone. My father left it for me."

"Your father?" asked Kazami.

Hiba gave a troubled smile.

"I don't really know what he did, but he suddenly accepted Mikage-san into our family ten years ago and then went off somewhere that same evening. That was the night of the great Kansai earthquake."

That final comment brought Sayama's hand to the left side of his chest.

Kazami and Izumo's expressions hardened and Shinjou leaned up against Sayama. That was all it took for him to remove his hand from his chest. He said he was fine, but his face was a bit pale.

When Hiba gave him a curious look, he nodded.

"Now, it is time we got going. We can speak some more once this battle is over." He took a breath. "We can see if our fight and your fight can work together along with these impurities you speak of."

Two figures travelled along a deserted road.

The morning sun lit up the man and woman who travelled north along the main road.

They were Gyes in her red suit and Aigaion.

They both kicked off the asphalt as they moved quickly to the north. They cut through the air as they ran and each step took them from one streetlight to the next, so their running was made up of several-meter leaps.

They were quite fast.

They passed between the scattering of empty and unmoving cars as they hurried north.

Gyes ran in front and Aigaion followed with a girl in a white dress floating ahead of him. She was curled up like a child and elevated a bit above his head.

He was carrying Mikage via gravitational control.

He watched her as her eyes remained closed and she did not move. His scratched cheek loosened.

"She put up quite a fight."

"Until she lost consciousness, she believed her partner would come rescue her. …Is she human?"

Aigaion looked at Mikage's neck.

"No. We need to have Moira 2nd look at her to be certain, but I've never seen a human like this."

"Neither have I."

She brought her right hand to her cheek which also had four parallel scratches on it, but they vanished as she traced her fingers across them.

"It took longer than expected to secure her. Should we call Cottus here?"

"Riding your god of war would be faster."

"I can only use it for short periods of time. I don't need the machine, but I want to preserve as much strength as possible when the enemy might pursue us."

"How reliable," said Aigaion.

Suddenly, light raced over their heads from ahead of them to behind them. The four beams of light continued for a few seconds.

"That was Cottus's weapon!"

Just before the bombardment hit, Aigaion grabbed Mikage in his arms and leaped forward with Gyes.

At the same time, a rock-splitting explosion burst out behind them.

A powerful gust of wind from behind threatened to scoop their feet out from under them. The pressure of the wind rivalled a solid wall and it pushed them even further forward. Gyes glanced over her shoulder while in midair.

“Cottus! Why did you fire!?”

“Enemy approaching.”

That transmitted voice caused Gyes to focus more closely on her surroundings and she checked for movement behind them.

Fragments scattered from the main road and smoke trailed behind them.

She did not see anything there until something burst through the smoke.

She saw two motorcycles. They often saw those machines on Low-Gear's roads. It depended on the specific model, but they tended to have good acceleration and they were a decent machine for transporting small numbers of people.

And the loud noises of their engines suggested these two could travel at high speed.

She did not recognize the boy and girl on one of them, but the boy on the other was a different story.

"The descendent of Hiba!"

Gyes made several decisions in midair and the danger she sensed in this opponent rose considerably.

The enemy had mobility, speed, the possibility of concept weapons, combat experience, the knowledge needed for concept combat, and a set objective.

She made a stern decision as to how to deal with them.

They would lure the enemy somewhere they could not use their mobility and speed. If the enemy did have concept weapons, they only had to use even more power

than those weapons. She and her fellow automatons had thousands of years of combat experience and knowledge. And if this enemy had a set objective, they only had to divert them from it.

"Aigaion!" she shouted as she landed.

"Got it," he said as he looked to the right of the road.

There he saw a large collection of buildings. The main entrance of the giant facility said Taka-Akita Academy.

"Let's finish this here!"

Gyes pulled a palm-sized sheet of metal from her pocket. The steel had a blue crystal embedded in it and she laughed as she ran through the front gate with it in her hand.

She directed the laugh toward the two motorcycles pursuing them.

The wind blew across the two vehicles as they took tight corners that sent their back wheels skidding. Gyes turned toward the one with a boy and girl onboard and spoke to them.

"We will use this philosopher's stone board to eliminate you two outsiders!"

As she faced them and ran backwards, she held up the metal panel and gave a shout.

"We will add on another concept!"

An instant later, the small metal board burst and the world changed accordingly.

In an instant, everything changed just as Gyes and Aigaion wanted.

Afterword

There was a small break, but here is Owari no Chronicle 3-A.

This is a very long story, so thank you for sticking with me. Recently I've been hoping I can actually write the entire thing to the end.

Anyway, 1 and 2 laid the groundwork and now the story begins to move forward in 3. Everyone's stances and connections to the past will become more involved from now on, so the story might get even longer.

I finally feel like I'm having an easier time writing this. There are still plenty of difficulties though, and I have tons of homework to do. At any rate, I'll be doing the best I can.

Now let's get to the usual chat.

"Did you read it?"

"I was looking at the afterwords with my other old upperclassman and I get the feeling I don't really have to read it."

"If you don't follow the proper customs, you'll be cursed, so be careful."

"What kind of curse?"

"You'll wake up in the middle of the night and find me at your pillow drinking tomato juice and playing Famicom. I'll say 'C'mon, that totally hit!', so make sure to agree."

"Please spare me that horrible scene. By the way, I see you finally put in one of those characters you like."

"What character?"

"Moira 1st."

"There's already been an automaton."

"No, I meant blondes with giant tits. You really like them, don't you?"

"Oh, you're finally using words like 'tits'. You really have changed."

"That isn't how I thought you'd react!"

"And are you forgetting that she's a doll? You can't look at it the same way. …Just kidding. Did you really think I'd say that? What matters is the romance. Keep it spinning!!"

"That's more like it. I was expecting that kind of a self-deprecating gag."

"I'm glad I could live up to your expectations, but I've been using that kind of joke too much lately. I need to think up something new. Maybe it would have more impact if I was like you and insisted on someone below the age of ten."

"My girlfriend is going to read this, so stop making things up!! We're thinking of getting married soon, so saying I like babies is fine but little girls are out of the question."

"I'm pretty sure both are out of the question, so don't worry. And this will be going out to the entire nation, so it's time to start regretting this."

"I had a bad feeling about this when the other old upperclassman said he recommended me and that I should 'prepare myself'. You never betray people's expectations, do you?"

"Just so you know, that guy is a terrible person who barges in and only talks about cats and video games when I'm suffering from a cold."

"Yeah, he did that to me too. He said he was thinking of starting to make doujins because he was turning thirty ."

"Is that some twisted version of going bungee jumping when you turn thirty? There really isn't a single normal person around me. …And you aren't helping!"

"Please stop getting mad at me for no reason. More importantly, why does the data on the next volume say it 's the middle part?"

"Tee hee."

"This is going to end up as text, so saying it cutely isn't going to help. Why isn't it the second part the last part!?"

Don't worry about it.

This time my proofreading music was "Art of Fight" from the game Ryuuko no Ken. (Am I the only one that thinks you could take that to mean "aesthetics of fighting

”? And people have mixed opinions of music with no real context, but I find it’s good at getting me fired up.)

“Who exactly is hoping for a fight?”

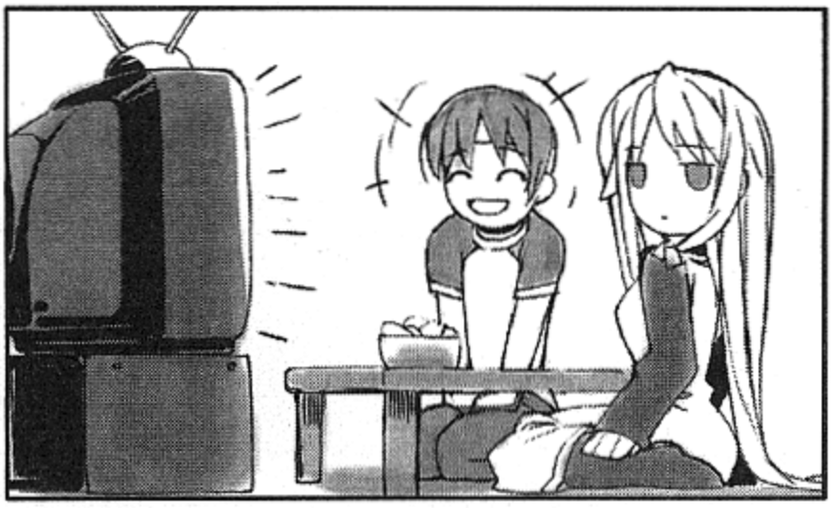
You can try thinking about that.

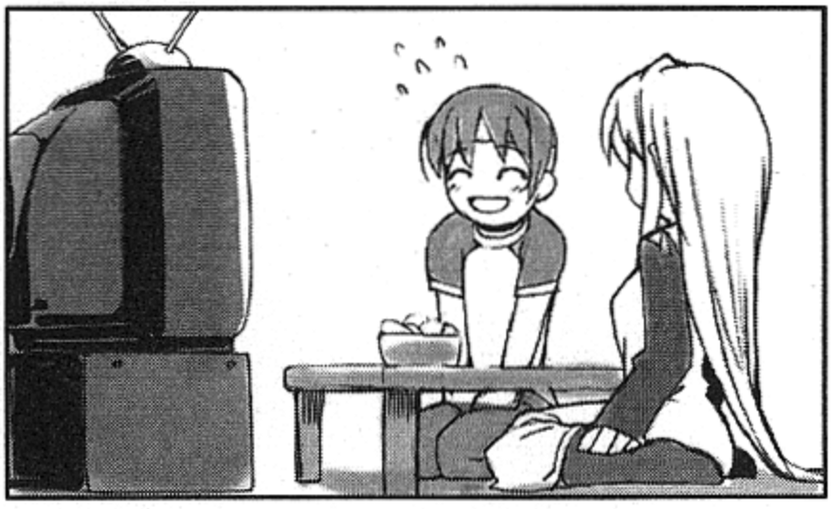
Anyway, the next book will be out in June, so wait just a bit.

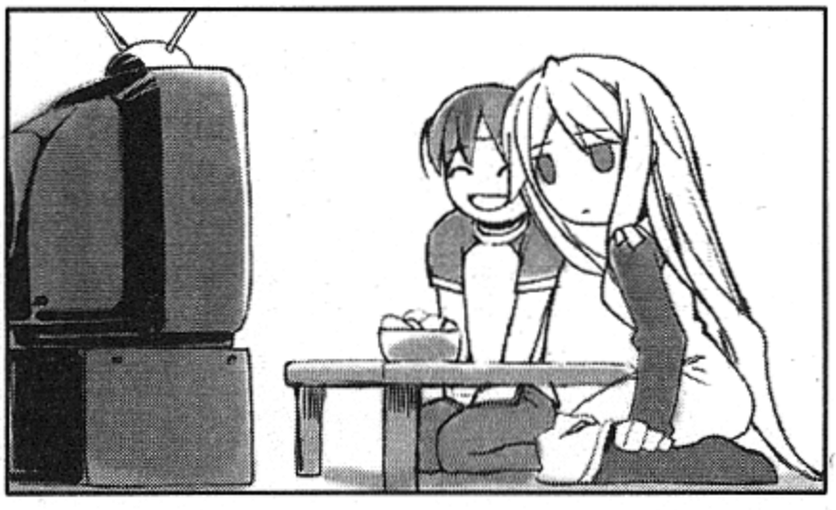
February 2004. A morning with pollen approaching.

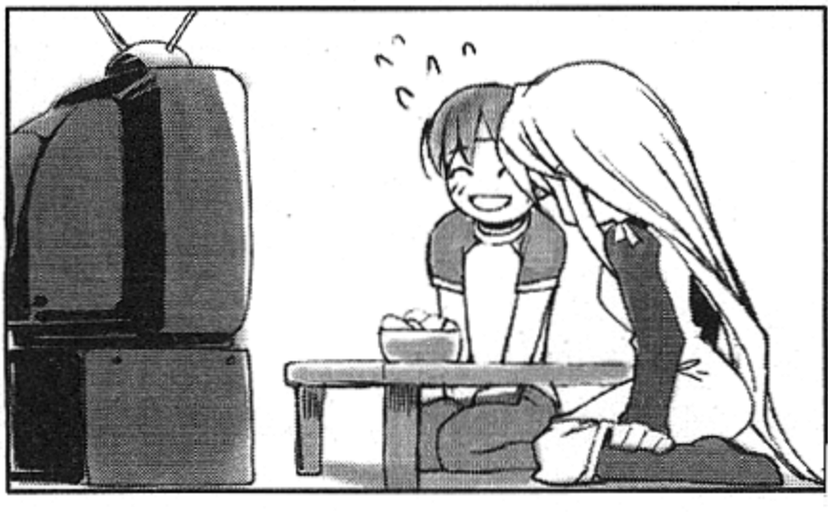
-Kawakami Minoru

Satoyasu Omake









Afterword

Omake Robot
(Tentative Title)

Satoyasu.

Afterword

Omake Robot (Tentative Title)

Satoyasu

Notes

1. ↑ Geckos are considered lucky because the Japanese word can be written with kanji meaning “house protector”.
2. ↑ Kazuo contains the kanji for 1.